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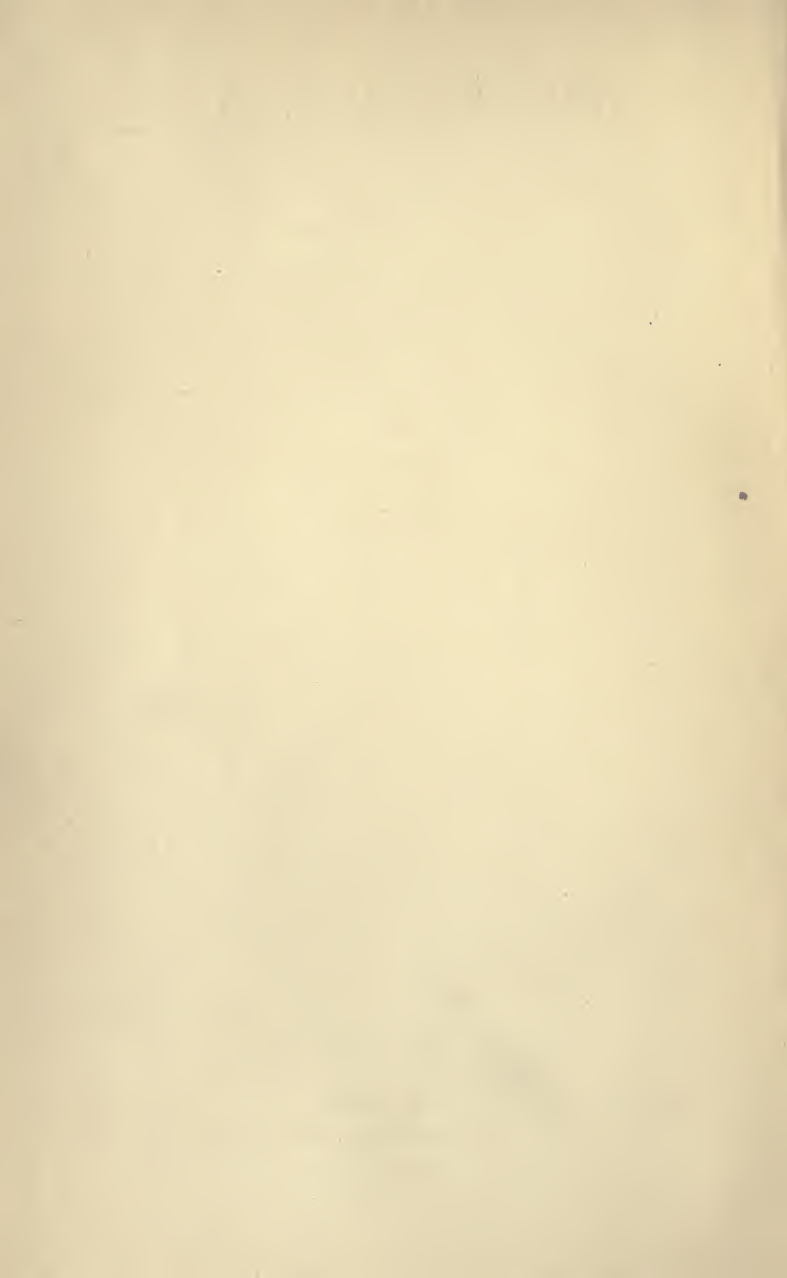




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# ONCE AGAIN.

BY

MRS. FORRESTER,

AUTHOR OF "JUNE," "I HAVE LIVED AND LOVED," "VIVA,"  
"MY LORD AND MY LADY," ETC., ETC.



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## ONCE AGAIN.

## CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG man and a pretty girl madly in love. The adverb is correct. Love, like anger, is a brief madness. Love, when every question of prudence, of expediency, of consideration for the future, is flung recklessly to the winds, is a disastrous form of madness.

The man is much madder than the girl, inasmuch as his passion is a thousandfold stronger than hers. She, indeed, pretty, fair, and foolish, without much character, has hitherto been uninfluenced by strong feeling of any kind. Her lover's fire has, however, kindled a certain amount of answering warmth in her breast, and he has succeeded in persuading her that life without him would not be worth living. She is weak; she is yielding; she has a little—only a little—touch of romance, and she is younger than her nineteen years warrant. She has always leaned on a stronger nature. Until she met, just one month ago, the rock which at present offers her its support, she had leaned upon her mother; but the breast of the stalwart young soldier seemed to suggest a more attractive shelter than the maternal bosom, and, resolutely shutting her eyes to any but the most agreeable and seductive thoughts of the future, Miss Dulcie proposed to herself to repose blissfully and continuously on the impassioned heart of Mr. Noel Trevor for the next five decades.

The absolutely insuperable obstacle represented by the young gentleman's want of fortune added the necessary fuel to the flames.

Mrs. Vernon, Dulcie's mother,—a thorough woman of the world, with a nature as strong as her daughter's was weak,—was not in the very smallest degree likely to be influ-

enced by any amount of tears and prayers from despairing lovers. She knew, or thought she knew, the exact value of love,—so called by rash and inconsiderate youth,—and would not have permitted Cupid to unfurl one feather of his wings under her roof unless he brought substantial offerings along with his false and foolish vows. Love, forsooth! Perjured little wretch! Source of abiding misery and wretchedness since Time began! Dulcie had met Mr. Trevor in a country house, where, most unusual to relate, she had been a guest without her mother. After they had danced, ridden, walked, and sung together, the first symptoms of madness discovered themselves: the moment they were parted the disease assumed a serious form.

One November afternoon, Mr. Trevor, feeling it utterly impossible to remain another twenty-four hours without seeing the only object for which he at present existed, resolved to take the desperate measure of calling at the house which shrined his angel, and, about the hour when the feminine and modest orgy which is performed each afternoon in the family circle was likely to be in full swing, he knocked at the door of No. — Grosvenor Street and prepared to face the dragon who guarded the golden apple he coveted. For Dulcie had represented her mamma to him somewhat in the light of a dragon,—knowing as well as she did that lady's opinion on the subject of impecunious admirers. Noel, being a straightforward young soldier, had interspersed his vows with lamentations on the limited condition of his finances, and, whilst pleading ardently for her love and her hand, had not scrupled to represent his own unfitness to receive the gift.

He had fondly imagined that Dulcie would in some manner have paved the way for his visit, have prepared her mother's mind for an approaching suitor; but he reckoned without his fair. Dulcie was an arrant coward, very much in awe of her mother, and had only mentioned her meeting with Mr. Trevor in so casual a manner that it had not given Mrs. Vernon the smallest *arrière-pensée*. But Noel had not been five minutes in her charming drawing-room before that astute lady grasped the state of affairs. Mr. Trevor was in love with her daughter, and, from the slight confusion and excitement in the man-

ner of her usually placid Dulcie, she divined that his feeling was reciprocated.

As she knew nothing of Mr. Trevor, his connections and affairs, his desirability or the reverse, her behavior to him was tinted by a courteous neutrality: she was very pleasant, very civil, but she gave him no opportunity of exchanging a glance or word alone with Dulcie, and when he took his leave she did not invite him to repeat his visit. He prolonged his call, fraught as it was to him with embarrassment and discomfort, hoping against hope that other guests would come in and divert Mrs. Vernon's attention from himself and her daughter, thus giving them a chance of communicating eternal promises of fidelity with their eyes, and perhaps by whispers; but on this unfortunate afternoon he was the only visitor, and when he went out from the presence which he had entered with a beating and hopeful heart it was with a confused feeling of having beaten his head against, not a brick wall, but a velvet cushion.

"Who is this Mr. Trevor, Dulcie?" inquired her mother, when the door had closed upon their visitor. Her tone was airy and indifferent.

Dulcie blushed and pretended to arrange the teacups.

"I do not know, mamma," she returned, in a confused voice.

"Is he related to *the* Trevors?"

"I don't think so."

"Who are his people?"

"I—I don't think he has any—particularly," stumbled Dulcie. "His mother died a year ago, and he has not any father or brothers or sisters."

"Where does he live?"

"I don't think he lives anywhere. He is in the —th, and his regiment is going to India in a month or two."

Mrs. Vernon involuntarily heaved a slight sigh of relief. India is an excellent place for impecunious young soldiers.

"How did the Fawcetts come to know him?" she inquired, with symptoms of waning interest in her tone.

"I—I think he was at school with Charlie."

"Rather foolish of them to ask him there with two marriageable daughters," observed Mrs. Vernon, looking



full at poor embarrassed Dulcie, "if, as I gather from what you say, he has no money and no expectations. However, he seems rather a dull young man, so perhaps they do not consider him dangerous."

The stab penetrated Dulcie's breast, but she gave no sign. She understood well enough what her mother meant; she knew, as she had known before, that the case was hopeless. Tears came into her eyes, and she turned away to hide them, but Mrs. Vernon read her face as an open page.

"This," she said to herself, with a sense of irritation, "comes of my being foolish enough to allow her to stay in a house without me. Really I should have given Agnes Fawcett credit for a little more discretion than to invite a man of that sort."

Meantime, Noel was walking in deep dejection to his club. Arrived there, he proceeded to the smoking-room, flung himself into a low chair, and having, like Jupiter, concealed himself in clouds, gave the rein to the most dismal thoughts and imaginings. He conceived a hatred of Mrs. Vernon which that courteous and well-bred lady had certainly done little to merit during their interview: everything assumed a tinge of inky despair: the world was Pandora's box without its one redeeming feature. If he could only write to his beloved one! But he felt certain that dreadful mother of hers opened her letters. Communicate with her in some way he must and would; but how?

He dined without appetite, and retired again to seek the soothing influence of nicotine, finally deciding to write to Dulcie a letter which, even if it fell, as he foresaw it would, into the hands of Mrs. Vernon, could not do any serious mischief. He took up his pen, and, after many nibblings at its tail, for he was not very clever at expressing his thoughts on paper, wrote,—

"DEAR MISS VERNON,—

"I am quite ashamed that I have only just remembered the song I promised to get you." ("Of course she'll tumble to that," he soliloquized, grinding the pen in his strong young teeth.) "But I shall get it the first thing to-morrow and send it." (After this Mr. Trevor took at least ten



minutes to decide on his next sentence.) "I hope," he ultimately continued, "that I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again before I go to India. Do you walk in the Row sometimes in the morning, or might not we do a play together?"

"Believe me,

"Yours sincerely,

"NOEL TREVOR."

"There!" he ejaculated, relieved, "there is nothing in that that the old cat may not see, and Dulcie—Jove! what a sweet, dear name it is!—must answer it. She'll understand, of course, little darling, why I've made it so cool and formal."

Mrs. Vernon was rather vexed at the discovery she had made, but did not allow it to trouble her seriously. Her Dulcie was so well brought up, so thoroughly under her control, that she could not imagine her turning restive; and then, heaven be thanked! this young man was going to India, and Dulcie would straightway forget all about him. The only thing to do was to prevent their meeting in the mean time. Mrs. Vernon thoroughly considered the question in all its bearings; whether opposition would be dangerous, whether it would be more prudent to pretend to see nothing; but, on the whole, knowing her own strength and Dulcie's weakness, she concluded the best plan would be to make the girl understand that young Trevor was not to be thought of for an instant.

Mrs. Vernon was an ambitious woman, and had very different views for her pretty daughter.

She woke earlier than usual the following morning, as often happens to people when they have vexing thoughts lying in wait at their pillow-heads, and had plenty of time to reflect on the subject in every aspect before her maid came to call her.

"Bring *all* the letters to me when the postman comes, Morton," she said, having an intuition that Mr. Trevor would probably employ that messenger of love. The result proved the correctness of her suspicions.

A letter bearing her daughter's name, with the large device of a military club on the flap of the envelope, was handed to her with her own correspondence.

*"To Miss Dulcie Vernon,"*

she read, in a school-boyish hand. Without hesitation Mrs. Vernon broke the seal, and read the contents of the letter, seeing completely through Mr. Trevor's *ruse* at the first glance. When she and her daughter met at breakfast, her manner was more than usually kind and affectionate. It was not until the conclusion of the sociable little meal that she alluded to the disagreeable subject weighing on her mind. She spoke in a very kind but a very firm voice, so that Dulcie might know there was no appeal from her decision.

"Dulcie dear,"—taking up the envelope and pausing for a moment with it in her hand,—“this came for you this morning. I do not approve of young men writing to you, and I opened it.”

Dulcie blushed furiously. She was indignant at her precious missive having been tampered with, and she was terribly frightened lest Noel should have given vent to any endearing expressions in it that might draw down the vials of her mother's wrath on their devoted heads.

She took it from Mrs. Vernon's hand, but was too paralyzed by her emotions to attempt to open it.

“Read it,” said her mother, suavely. “You must answer it. I shall tell you what to say.” And Mrs. Vernon was obliging enough to turn away to the window, in order to mitigate her timorous daughter's confusion.

Dulcie comprehended her lover's stratagem. There had been no question of his sending her any song, but she understood that it was a device on his part to write to her, and an intimation where he might be addressed.

Her mother gave her plenty of time to read the note before she returned to the table.

“I dare say,” she remarked, quite affably, “that Mr. Trevor is an excellent young man; but I do not wish him to entertain any mistaken ideas that might lead to disappointment later on: so I will make a little draft of a note, and when the song arrives you shall write it and send it off.”

Dulcie answered not a word. She sat holding the letter and looking at the fire. Mrs. Vernon took this silence as implying complete submission. She had not, indeed, ex-

pected any resistance from her habitually docile daughter. But then Dulcie had never yet been, or fancied herself, in love.

Resolute people with strong wills are very often unprepared for the commonest weapon of the weak,—deceit. When they command and their victim appears passive, they too often take it for granted that their will has triumphed and is acquiesced in.

Mrs. Vernon came up to Dulcie and kissed her, feeling all the benevolence of a generous victor.

“You know, dear child,” she said, “my first object in life is your happiness.”

And with a kind little pressure on Dulcie’s shoulder, and scarcely remarking that her embrace was not returned, or, if she did, making allowance for the girl’s disappointment, she went off light-heartedly to her boudoir, to make the draft that was to crush Mr. Trevor’s presumptuous hopes.

A dull feeling of rebellion surged in slow waves over Dulcie’s heart. Why was she to submit to her mother’s fiat in a matter so all-important to her? She loved Noel; he loved her: why should their young hearts be blighted for the sake of ambition? If her mother had outgrown all memories of love and youth (Dulcie took leave to doubt whether there were any such episodes to be remembered), why was she to be condemned to a life without romance? Why should she be sacrificed to vanity and ambition? She felt sure—with smothered resentment—that if any horrid old wretch with a title or a great deal of money came forward as a suitor, her mother would be ready to drive her to the altar in spite of herself. Vague thoughts of resistance flitted through the girl’s brain, but she had sufficient consciousness of her own weakness to realize that a hand-to-hand combat with her mother would leave her vanquished and weaponless before a minute had elapsed.

She would write the letter that her mother dictated; she would seem to acquiesce; but, before that, she would write another letter on her own account, explaining to Noel that the one he would receive later was simply sent at her mother’s dictation, and was in no way to be taken as the expression of her own sentiments.



Mrs. Vernon returned, draft in hand, before Dulcie had finished her cogitations.

"Come, dear, and write it at once: then it will be done with!" said mamma, persuasively.

And Dulcie, still without a word, followed her mother to the boudoir, and, sitting down at the writing-table, indited the following lines to Mr. Trevor:

"DEAR MR. TREVOR,—

"I have just received the song. Thank you for sending it. We are not going out in the evening at present, as my mother has a cold, and we do not walk in the Park in the winter.

"Believe me, yours truly,  
"DULCIE VERNON."

Mrs. Vernon had thought it quite possible that Dulcie would remonstrate about the extreme coldness and formality of the note, and was agreeably surprised to see her copying it without comment. When it was finished and the envelope directed, she lighted a taper and affixed a neat little red seal to it to make quite sure that it should not be tampered with.

"I *must* go out this fine morning," remarked Dulcie, her task finished, and her mother responded, cheerfully,—

"Yes, do, my dear. Morton shall go with you. You do not want to start before twelve, I suppose? It is a quarter to eleven now. Will you not practise your singing a little first?"

But Dulcie had something else to do than to practise singing. She retired to her bedroom and wrote another—quite a different—letter to Mr. Trevor. A certain amount of fear and conscious guilt trembled at her heart. She had never written to a young man before. But the idea had taken firmly hold of her that she had a right to bestow her heart where she chose, and that if she was doing a bold and wrong thing her mother had driven her to it.

Although her door was locked, her heart palpitated very distinctly as she wrote the words "Dearest Noel," and almost involuntarily she glanced over her shoulder to make sure that no one was standing behind her. Reassured, she continued:

"Mamma has made me write the *most horrid* note in answer to yours. Of course I was obliged to do as she told me, but you will understand—won't you?—that it is *not my fault*. Wasn't it *wretched* yesterday not being able to say a word to each other alone? It *hardly ever* happens that we do not have three or four people calling in the afternoon. I suppose mamma suspects something, and she thinks of nothing but money and position, and is always saying that *love is all nonsense*, and that people are sure to be unhappy if they are poor, whereas if they are rich, and get tired of each other, or don't get on, they have other things to fall back upon. Isn't it *horrid*! She won't let me go near the Park, I know, for fear I should meet you; but I mean to walk every morning now up Bond Street, through Cavendish Square, and up Portland Place to the Regent's Park, a place *I hate*, but I shall not hate it if I meet you there. Morton, our maid, always walks out with me, but she is a good old thing, and won't tell of us, I know. Of course you won't come to-day, because you won't get this in time; but I shall look forward to seeing you to-morrow. Always, dearest Noel, yours,

"DULCIE.

"P.S.—Write to me and direct the envelope to Mrs. Morton in a feigned hand, and don't write on those envelopes with the club crest."

Dulcie addressed her letter, unlocked her door, and, like a good, obedient daughter, went into the drawing-room and began to practise her scales.

Meantime, Mrs. Vernon gave strict injunctions to Morton that she was not to walk in Piccadilly or near the Row with Miss Dulcie. They might go towards the Marble Arch, Oxford Street, or the Regent's Park. She even gave the maid a commission to execute at Marshall and Snelgrove's *en route*. And, whilst this astute lady made her plans and laid her parallels, she was innocent of the remotest suspicion that her guileless young daughter was similarly employed.

Morton was a comely and comfortable-looking woman of five-and-forty, of a romantic turn, and with a very unevenly-balanced mind. All her spare time and a good

deal of time that she ought not to have spared was devoted to novel-reading, and many a time her eyes were red from crying over the woes of lovers. She had the leaning towards intrigue that is the natural bent of Abigail, and it would have been impossible to find a more imprudent or ill-advised counsellor for a young girl who had not a very sound head. She belonged to that class of people who commit the most serious mischief in the world, —those who “don’t mean any harm.” But she was also of a wavering and irresolute nature, and, though she might be tempted into danger by sentiment, she would not, it is to be feared, have scrupled to scramble out again, leaving her accomplices in the lurch.

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## CHAPTER II.

MORTON had attended Dulcie on her visit to Mrs. Fawcett, and knew, therefore, something about Mr. Trevor and her young lady’s predilection for him. He had spoken very pleasantly to her on one or two occasions when they had met on the staircase, and civil words from good-looking young men always produced their full effect on her sympathetic nature. Dulcie had, therefore, no need of preliminary statement or explanation; so, the moment they issued from the portals of the house, she broke the ice.

“Morton, what a shame of you to take my letter to mamma this morning!”

“Lor, miss,” expostulated Morton, “what was I to do? Your ma told me to bring her *all* the letters; and how was I to know anything about it, or that you hadn’t asked her to look at yours, as she is earlier than you?”

“You might have been sharp enough to guess,” said Dulcie, not yet propitiated.

“Well, miss, but you’ve never had a letter from a gentleman in your life before,” protested Morton.

“All the more reason I should have it brought me when it did come!” retorted Dulcie. “I call it most un-

kind and unfair of mamma, and I don't see what right she has to open my letters. You remember that nice Mr Trevor at Lowlands, Morton?"

"Yes, miss."

"Well, he called yesterday, and mamma was very stiff and formal with him, and, as ill luck would have it, no one else came in, and I could not get a word alone with him. So then he went off to his club and wrote to me."

"Lor!" said Morton, again making use of her favorite ejaculation. "And your ma opened it?"

"Of course there was nothing in it that mamma might not see," observed Dulcie. "He was much too clever for that. He first made an excuse about sending me a song, and asked whether he might not go to a play with us, or if we did not walk in the Row. Mamma made me write the most horrid letter in answer, but— Swear, Morton, you won't tell if I tell you something?"

Morton's eyes gleamed with interest and curiosity.

"I won't tell," she answered, promptly.

Dulcie drew the letter from her pocket.

"I have written him another," she said, triumphantly.

They were close to a pillar-box, and she hurried a step forward and popped it in. Morton gasped. She had never suspected her young lady to be capable of such temerity.

"Oh, dear! what would your ma say, if she knew?"

"But she won't know, unless you tell her," replied Dulcie; "and you couldn't be such a wretch as that. And, what is more, you are to do something very important indeed for us."

"I am?" said Morton, flattered.

Dulcie sank her voice to a whisper.

"He is going to write to me and direct the letters to you."

Morton looked rather overwhelmed for a moment. But she soon made up her mind to play Nurse to this Romeo and Juliet, and took the utmost interest in the little drama she was to assist at.

"You see, he will be going away in a month or two," said Dulcie, judiciously suppressing any mention of serious intentions, "to India."

"Poor young gentleman!" remarked Morton, patheti-



cally. "Very likely he'll never come back, or, if he does, he'll be as yaller as a guinea."

In the evening, as Dulcie sat reading her novel, and Mrs. Vernon gently dozed, the postman's thunder was heard, and an intuition made Dulcie's breast palpitate at the thought that something very precious had found its way into the house through the slit in the door.

She dared not go in quest of it, but remained on tenter-hooks whilst the butler brought up a couple of letters for her mother, and departed again. Two or three minutes elapsed, then the door opened softly to admit Morton with a suspiciously demure countenance. She came up to Dulcie, and, under pretext of not disturbing Mrs. Vernon, whispered,—

"I came to ask you, miss, where you would like the bows put on that lace skirt." And then she gave a significant little nod and pointed to her pocket.

"I will come and show you," replied Dulcie, rising promptly; and the conspirators went out together.

"Oh, you dear, good Morton!" cried Dulcie, in a suppressed whisper, as the maid handed her a substantial letter addressed to Mrs. Morton.

"I've lighted your candles," said the maid, and proceeded down-stairs to resume her supper, without any further allusion to dress or bows.

And Dulcie, locking herself in her room, read her first love-letter with an ecstasy which I need not perhaps pause to describe. Suffice it to say that the missive was not original, and that the word "darling" did not recur more than twelve times.

No uneasy prescience of evil, no misgiving of any sort or kind, visited Mrs. Vernon as she dozed delightfully in her luxurious chair. Could she but have guessed that a few yards above her head her lovely daughter's breast was palpitating over the impassioned sentences of her young adorer, or shall we say, as mamma would have said, "the idiotic rhodomontade of a penniless young fool"?

Noel expressed his intention of wearing out the pavement (or the soles of his boots) in Portland Place awaiting his beloved. He had always hitherto thought it a singularly dull street, but now, henceforth and forever, it would be the most heavenly spot on earth, etc., etc.



Strange, Dulcie reflected, how *les beaux esprits se rencontrent*. She, too, had always thought Portland Place so dull; but now!!!

As in this world there is always an alloy to bliss, Dulcie, her first raptures over, began to be tormented by fears about the weather. The climate of our dear old England is not reliable, especially in the month of November. Suppose it should rain in torrents the next morning, or that the new-found El Dorado, Portland Place, should be enveloped in a yellow fog. Weather would not keep Dulcie from her lover, but it might deter her mother from giving consent to the accustomed morning walk. Still, there was the letter, which in itself was sufficient aliment for love to feed on for at least a week, and, whenever the weather did give her a chance, Noel would of a certainty be found at their trysting-place: had he not sworn it!

With light heart and step as though she trod on air, Dulcie returned to the drawing-room,—naughty Dulcie!—looking as innocent as Miss Puss who has had a surreptitious lap at the cream-jug.

Mrs. Vernon was awake by this time, and engaged in reading “What the World says.”

“By the way,” she remarked, presently, looking up, “did not I hear you and Morton talking about your dress? What have you decided?”

Dulcie turned aside to blush. The first steps along the path of deceit are not smooth to the novice. She hesitated and stammered a little, and was terrified lest her mother should remark her confusion.

“It—it is not quite—quite settled,” she replied. “We think we shall be able to judge better by daylight.”

Mrs. Vernon, having just arrived at a paragraph that interested her, did not remark Dulcie’s embarrassment. After a considerable pause, she asked another question.

“Did the song come, after all?”

“Yes, mamma.”

“And you sent off the note?”

“Yes, mamma.”

“What is the song?”

Dulcie hesitated.

“‘Golden Love,’” she said, reluctantly.

“But you have it! Let me look!”

Dulcie brought it.

"And set for a contralto!" remarked Mrs. Vernon.

But she put it down without further comment. Of course she had known all along that it was only a *ruse* on the young man's part. But he must be rather a silly young man.

After all, the fates were propitious. The following morning was bright, and even sunshiny as sunshine goes in London in November. Full of glee, Dulcie set forth, accompanied by Morton, on whom something of her own excitement was reflected.

"If your mamma was to find it out!" she said, half-way up Bond Street, in rather a Cassandra-like voice; but Dulcie pooh-poohed the idea in a light-hearted way.

In Cavendish Square the impatient Romeo was pacing. It was a sight to see how those two comely young countenances were transfigured and glorified as they simultaneously caught sight of each other. The romantic Morton heaved a sigh which halted between sympathy and envy. She loitered a little behind; but Dulcie had sufficient sense of the proprieties to know what a bad effect this would have should they by any unlucky chance be seen, and summoned her attendant promptly to her side. The first few moments of natural *gêne* over, the maid was of no more account as an auditor to Noel and Dulcie than the wall to Pyramus and Thisbe, only that, mercifully, they were both on the right side of her.

And Morton, pretending to look the other way, was listening with the deepest interest, and heard every word that passed. Indeed, there was nothing which any one except a mamma with ambitious views for her daughter might not have heard; for Dulcie was a modest, well-brought-up young lady, and Noel was animated by the most honest if ardent love, and looked up to his idol with the reverence that a nice-minded young fellow always entertains for the girl he loves,—as long as she allows him.

Every day for a whole week Phœbus smiled his wintry, far-off smile on this happy pair: their hearts supplied the warmth he lacked. Then for three days he hid himself, and the town was veiled in a hideous black fog, and one side of Portland Place could not see the other side, and Mrs. Vernon would not hear of Dulcie going out.

Morton made a martyr of herself in a good cause, and caught a severe cold by going to meet Mr. Trevor in her young lady's place, and Noel, generous like most impecunious youths, made her a present ill proportioned to his means.

It was at this juncture, when he had reached the highest point of love-madness, that a friend of his arrived in London *en route* for the Cape,—a friend not possessed of the highest principles or animated by very nice or delicate scruples.

For three days Noel had not set eyes on his darling (by the way, this delightful term of endearment is getting sadly hackneyed by frequent use in the ballads of the day). He was burning to talk about her, after the manner of his kind when in love, and he pounced on this "pal" as a drowning man would have pounced on a plank, and poured his love and woes, with joy unspeakable, into the ears which seemed to listen kindly.

He was only interrupted by a few pertinent questions.

"Has the girl got any stuff?" was the first.

Noel was shocked at the coarse brutality of the question. He was far too much in love not to think "stuff" a hinderance rather than otherwise to the charms of his adored one.

"I don't know or care," he replied.

"But *has* she?" persisted the other.

Noel dared not offend his friend, and made answer,—

"I suppose she will have. She is an only child, and her mother appears to be very well off."

"Run away with her," said the friend, tersely.

Noel's eyes brightened.

"I wish to heaven I could!" he exclaimed. "But"—relapsing into despondency—"there's no Gretna Green."

"There's the registry office, which is a good deal handier."

Noel contemplated his friend with a mixture of awe and admiration.

"Nothing simpler. You've only got to swear that she is of age and has no parents, and to give notice a fortnight or so beforehand."

"But could not one be had up for perjury?" gasped Noel.



"The registrar won't bother his head. And, once it is done, it can't be undone, you know."

"But she looks so young."

"She can put on a thick veil," said Mephistopheles.

Poor Faust, though his intentions were strictly honorable, felt as though he was being incited to the blackest of crimes. But the temptation was overwhelming.

Dulcie to be his! Dulcie to go out to India with him! Oh, rapture!

His friend was, as has been said, unscrupulous. He had a liking for Noel, and thought he was helping him to a good thing. Seeing the impression he had made, he continued his persuasions as warmly as though he had some personal object to gain by Noel's elopement. And Noel, after the first shock of horror, took very kindly to the idea; and, though lying and deceit were extremely repugnant to his honest young mind, he looked leniently on his tempter's argument that "all is fair in love and war."

The following morning a brisk wind arose and dispersed the fog, and, with a high-beating heart, Noel flew to the rendezvous, where Dulcie was even before him.

Noel was divided between rapture and timidity, for he held Dulcie in that awe and reverence which a right-minded young man feels for a girl in whose purity and modesty he has a devout belief, and he trembled lest she should turn indignantly upon him when he broached the daring scheme that his friend had suggested. Not that he was going to shelter himself behind that friend: it would not do to let Dulcie guess for a moment that he had discussed her with any living soul. Haltingly, timidously, he approached his subject, and presently, encouraged by a gleam of intelligence in Dulcie's eyes and the smile on her pretty lips, he plunged boldly, fervently, ardently, into his appeal, and, with an eloquence of which he had not suspected himself capable, implored, urged, entreated.

The romance and daring of the idea commended themselves to Dulcie. Having begun the downward course of deceiving her mother, she gathered daily fresh impetus in her descent, and was almost prepared to clear the remaining obstacles at a bound.

Though she did not straightway consent, she lent an evidently willing ear to her lover's suggestions, and promised to think over what he had said. When Noel parted from her, he seemed to tread on air; in his imagination this priceless pearl was his already, and he bestirred himself to consider all the arrangements that it would be necessary for him to make in view of this ardently-desired union with his beloved. Naturally, the first thought which assailed him was the absolute necessity of ready money. He had only one hundred and fifty pounds a year besides his pay, and to forestall that would, he knew, be madness. His mother had left him a few diamonds and some plate. He had been fond of her, and it cost him a severe pang to think of parting with these things, which she had set great value on; but it was his only alternative.

It was rather fortunate for him that he took his friend, Captain Black, into confidence on this subject also.

"I'll see to it for you, if you like," he said. "I'm a very good hand at a bargain, and I expect you are a precious bad one, and these jewellers are the most confounded thieves."

Noel gratefully accepted this offer of service, got the plate-chest and jewel-box from his banker's, and intrusted them to his friend. He was exceedingly pleased when Black the same evening presented him with bank-notes to the amount of two hundred and five pounds. True, the things had probably cost three times that amount, but, as every one knows who has the smallest experience on the subject, buying is one thing and selling another. And it is perfectly certain that had Noel gone bargaining himself the result would have been far less satisfactory. He immediately proceeded to expend the odd fiver in a present to his friend, and next day handed over the greater portion of the remaining two hundred to his banker's safe keeping. Then he went joyously to the tryst with his beloved. They walked to the inner circle of the Regent's Park, and, as no one else was visible, Morton fell back several paces.

"My darling," said Noel, with eyes and voice full of feeling, "I hope you will never regret trusting your dear self to me. You know that I am a poor man. The one

thought which troubles me is that you may miss the comforts and luxury to which you have been accustomed. You know I should not consider the whole world good enough for you, my angel," cried the ardent lover: "it is an awful blow to me to think you will have to give up so much for my sake."

But Dulcie, with a bright smile, reassured him.

"Indeed," she pleaded, prettily, "I do not care at all about money. Mamma has talked and insisted so much upon it that I hate the very idea of marrying a rich man. I am not worldly, as she is, and all the people I have been introduced to who were good matches have been horrid, stupid, uninteresting creatures."

"I am afraid," said Noel, with a pang, "that it will be a dreadful blow to your poor mother losing you."

"Yes, I dare say she won't like it," assented Dulcie, rather unfeelingly. "But, if she only studies her own ambition and not my happiness, I don't see why I should consider her so much."

This argument comforted Noel.

After one or two more interviews, Dulcie consented to the marriage at the registry office. Captain Black was arch-conspirator, aider, and abettor.

"The old woman will be in a deuce of a rage at first, of course," he said, consolingly, "but if she's clever she'll probably end by saying, 'Bless you, my children!' and making the best of it. After that she will no doubt 'fork out,' which is the great point."

If it had not been for this Mephistopheles always at hand, I am not sure that Noel would have carried the matter through to the end, so stoutly did his conscience combat the proceeding. But Black argued and advised as though he had some personal object to gain by the marriage. His motive, however, was simply that of a self-willed and resolute person who, when he takes up a matter and gives advice, feels his *amour-propre* concerned in its being acted upon.

Dulcie, like many placid and amiable people without much character, was extremely tenacious and obstinate. She had taken it into her head to feel aggrieved and resentful against her mother. No pang of remorse visited her on the subject of the grief she was about to bring on



Mrs. Vernon: she told herself that it was entirely her mother's fault for not allowing her to see and love the man of her choice. She would not be sacrificed to any one's ambition.

Morton was the one to be flurried and anxious. She foresaw terrible consequences for herself: she would no doubt be discharged without a character when the *dénouement* occurred, and her complicity with it was discovered. Still, she could not see any possible way out of it, having gone so far.

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### CHAPTER III.

THE wedding-day arrived. Things seldom happen in the manner which we anticipate, and Dulcie, who, like most young maidens, had occasionally thought of herself as the heroine of such a ceremonial, had pictured the event as taking place at St. George's with some pomp, a bevy of bridesmaids and troops of wedding guests. But she felt no regret on the morning of her marriage-day at the absence of these conventional circumstances; indeed, the flavor lent by strategy and secrecy was more agreeably stimulating and exciting than mere commonplace preparations would have been.

Having thoroughly assured herself by appeal to Noel that marriage in a registry office was as legal and binding as though it were performed in Westminster Abbey by an archbishop, she troubled herself no more about the matter, and, indeed, congratulated herself that there was no fuss and trouble to be gone through. Perhaps a shadow of regret stole into her heart at being compelled to forego the trousseau-buying, and it occurred to her that it was hardly fair she should be done out of wedding-presents, of which many were owing to her in return for her own and her mother's gifts on similar occasions; but she reflected that people who had consciences could just as well send their contributions after the event as before.

No obstacle intervened to prevent her being at the place of rendezvous, where Noel, as eager and gallant a young bridegroom as wintry sun ever shone upon, received her

in a seventh heaven of bliss. The short, unimpressive ceremony was gone through, and, hey presto! Miss Dulcie Vernon was Mrs. Noel Trevor.

They had thought it expedient to put the sea between themselves and Mrs. Vernon for a few days, and immediately stepped into a hansom and ordered the man to drive to Noel's rooms to pick up his luggage. Morton had the night before taken a small trunk containing some portion of her young lady's wardrobe to the railway-station, to be left till called for. Everything seemed to favor the runaway couple. Noel wildly, Dulcie placidly, happy, were beaming smiles upon each other, when, lo! Nemesis overtook them.

They were turning a corner rather smartly, when down went the horse on the greasy wood pavement, and both were flung forward; but Noel, throwing his arm round Dulcie, soon put her back in her place, tenderly reassuring her. Meantime, the horse made two violent efforts to recover himself, and, having gained his feet, was trotting off again, when Noel, hearing an exclamation from the driver, looked up.

"Good God!" he cried, "he has slipped his bridle!" and on the impulse of the moment, thinking only of Dulcie's safety, he made a dash out of the cab to get to the animal's head. His heel caught the edge of the platform, and he was dashed violently on the pavement. The horse quickened his pace, the driver shouted for some one to stop him. Dulcie saw two or three men run forward, felt a sudden collision against the wheel of another vehicle, was again flung forward, and then she remembered nothing more.

When she came to her senses, she found herself in a rather dingy parlor, with two strange men standing over her. Her first emotion was a dull surprise; then, as some recollection of the events of the morning stole across her, she was seized with terror.

"Where am I? What has happened?" she asked of the elder of the two men, a kindly, rather pompous-looking individual.

"You are in good hands, ma'am," he replied, reassuringly.

It was the first time Dulcie had ever been addressed as



"ma'am." The color mounted to her cheek, and she wondered how this man could possibly know she was married. For the moment, she did not remark that her gloves had been removed, letting the wedding-ring tell its tale.

"Your hansom was stopped just in front here,—quite providential, one may say."

"And where—?" gasped Dulcie, "where—?"

"Ah! the poor gentleman, you mean. He is at St. George's Hospital before now."

"Is—he—dead?"

Dulcie turned ashy pale, and looked as though she would faint again.

"No, no, no!" replied the chemist. "I hope not. He has got a severe blow on the head, and I dare say won't be conscious for some time. I expect he has concussion of the brain; but there! he's in the best place he can be, and everything that can be done for him, will."

Dulcie closed her eyes for a minute or two to think. She was a coward by nature,—quite unfitted to stand alone. When she gave up relying on her mother, she had taken Noel as her support; but now, with him lying insensible at the hospital, what should she do? To whom could she turn? She shrank from going to St. George's, under the circumstances, and proclaiming herself his wife. No; there was only one thing to be done. She must go back home. They could not unmarry her now, and even her mother's anger was not so terrible to her as being thrown alone upon the world. Besides, she had only a sovereign in her purse.

The chemist, fearing a return of her fainting-fit, was again applying restoratives; but Dulcie was perfectly conscious now, and her supreme anxiety was to get away.

She opened her eyes.

"Thank you very much," she said. "I am quite well now. I should like to go home and—and see about sending to the hospital about my—brother. What"—hesitating, and putting her hand in her pocket—"what am I in your debt?"

"Nothing; nothing at all," returned the chemist, emphatically. "I am very pleased, ma'am, to have been of service. Perhaps you will allow me to see you home, as you seem a little shaky still?"

"No, thank you very much," returned Dulcie, hurriedly. "I am quite, quite well now."

"Shall I send for a cab? Best have a four-wheeler, I think, ma'am."

"Oh, yes; thank you." And the assistant was despatched to stop one.

"Thank you very, very much," she said, when the master put her into the cab; and he replied,—

"Not at all; not at all, ma'am. Don't speak of it. Where shall I tell him?"

A sudden instinct prompted Dulcie not to give her own address, and she mentioned a number in Brook Street, and, alighting there, hastened home on foot.

Mrs. Vernon was looking out of the window, alarmed at her daughter's unaccountable absence. She ran to the door and admitted her.

"Why, Dulcie—" she began, sharply; then, at sight of her daughter's white face, bent bonnet, and disarranged dress, she paused, aghast.

The conflicting emotions, anguish about Noel, and fear of her mother were too much for Dulcie. She had only time to totter into the dining-room, where she fainted again.

Mrs. Vernon took her in her arms, dragged her to the sofa, and was about in her terror to summon assistance, when she caught sight of Dulcie's hand with the significant emblem upon it. She felt as though turned to stone; then, stooping, she drew it from the unresisting hand, slipped it into her pocket, and rang the bell violently. Running to the door, she bade the butler bring water, and call Morton to come at once with smelling-salts.

Morton came, shaking like a leaf. The moment Mrs. Vernon glanced at her, she saw that the woman looked guilty and frightened, and guessed that she knew of the dreadful catastrophe. But the butler was in the room. He volunteered to fetch the doctor; but Mrs. Vernon was too much afraid of what Dulcie might reveal on returning to consciousness to risk the presence of a third person.

Dulcie was not long in recovering her senses this time, and as soon as she did so fell into violent hysterics. She encouraged them, as they staved off explanations for the

time. Mrs. Vernon had sent Morton out of the room the instant Dulcie showed signs of life.

"What has happened to you, Dulcie?" she asked, again and again; but Dulcie only moaned, and sobbed, and turned her head away, refusing to answer.

Mrs. Vernon was at her wits' end. All sorts of fearful possibilities chased each other through her brain. The suspense was more than she could bear. She left Dulcie sobbing and gasping in the dining-room, and summoned Morton to her boudoir.

"Now," she said, in her coldest, sternest manner, which was indeed very awe-inspiring, "what does all this mean?"

If her manner had been less severe, Morton would probably have fallen at her feet and confessed; now she was too much frightened to say a word, and, fearing some dreadful disgrace for herself, some vengeance on the part of her mistress, declared and protested her ignorance.

Mrs. Vernon was not deceived for a moment; but she had a cool head and plenty of common sense. It was of vital importance, she felt, to keep this dreadful affair secret: if she turned Morton out of doors, as she felt inclined to do, everything would come out at once, and there would be an *esclandre*, a thing that Mrs. Vernon dreaded even more than smallpox. So, finding nothing was to be got out of her maid, she left her, and returned to her daughter, who at once recommenced the sobs and cries which she had suspended during her mother's absence.

Mrs. Vernon changed her tactics. She asked no more questions, but, sitting down beside the couch, bathed Dulcie's forehead with eau-de-cologne, and endeavored to possess her soul in patience. The girl would have to be coaxed, that was evident; though her mamma would have infinitely preferred to box her ears and assail her with bitter words.

It was past luncheon-time, and the butler came in, and with a mysterious and sympathetic air—he had lived some time in the family—asked whether it should not be served.

Mrs. Vernon assented.

"Do not let James come in," she said.

James was the footman.

In kind tones, Dulcie's mother begged her to eat, or at all events to drink some wine; but Dulcie obstinately shook her head and continued, like Hezekiah, to turn her face to the wall. Her anxiety about Noel increased every moment; she could not forget seeing him hurled to the ground; a terror seized her that he was dead. How was she to find out? She longed to see Morton and implore her to run to the hospital for news.

"I will go up-stairs," she said, presently, rising slowly from the sofa.

Mrs. Vernon was really shocked to see how white and ill she looked.

"I will go with you, my dear," she said, putting her daughter's hand through her arm.

When they reached Dulcie's room, the girl asked that Morton might be sent to her.

Mrs. Vernon thought best to comply with this request, and retired to her own room, which adjoined her daughter's. Nothing could be more repugnant to this lady's proud nature than eavesdropping; but on this occasion, overpowered by anxiety, she crept near the door that communicated between the two rooms and listened intently, in the hope of getting some clue from the conversation of her daughter and Morton. It was soon evident from their smothered voices that they had taken this contingency into consideration: only a word here and there was audible: it was by the tone of their voices alone that the distracted mother could gain any hint as to what was passing. Morton's betrayed fear, anxiety, curiosity, Dulcie's despair: her sobs had begun again.

Mrs. Vernon was racked with apprehension: she *must* find out what had happened; and she presently set herself to think, with what calmness she might, over the best means of wresting this dreadful secret from one of the pair. She saw now that she had made a mistake in frightening Morton: she must try gentler tactics.

Descending to her boudoir, she rang and desired that her maid might be sent to her. She commanded her face and voice with a supreme effort, and when Morton came in looking frightened though obstinate, she was quite taken aback by the gentleness of her lady's voice and manner.



"Morton," began Mrs. Vernon, "I am very much distressed to see Miss Dulcie in this agitated state. Of course I am aware that you are to a certain extent in her confidence, and I must put it to your good feeling whether it is right that I, her mother, should be kept in suspense and in ignorance of what has happened to her."

Morton subsided into helpless tears: this tone of appeal from her haughty lady affected her visibly.

Mrs. Vernon saw her advantage, and pressed it

"You have been with me for some years now," she continued, more gently still. "You know how entirely devoted I am to Miss Dulcie, and you surely cannot be so heartless as to let me go on suffering this dreadful anxiety about her. What is all this mystery?"

Morton sobbed. She was emotional: every word Mrs. Vernon uttered pierced her like a stab. She was beginning to be conscious of the terrible enormity she had committed, especially now that this affair, which she had thought so romantic, had culminated in such a terrible catastrophe. Her superstitious mind saw a "judgment" in it. With the proneness of her order to look at the darkest side, she felt sure the poor young gentleman was killed.

Dulcie had implored her to go to the hospital and make inquiries, but she was afraid to do this. Of the two dreadful alternatives, she almost preferred to confess her participation in Dulcie's guilt to Dulcie's mother than to have the terrible secret, with perhaps its dreadful consequences, on her mind. At worst by confessing she could lose her place, and she was shrewd enough to see that Mrs. Vernon could not refuse to give her a character without betraying matters which she would not care to have disclosed.

So, amidst many tears and sighs and groans, she related the story in outline, ending with the death (of which she was quite certain) of the poor young gentleman. Mrs. Vernon was absolutely paralyzed by the recital. She felt as though her senses had been stunned by a violent blow. Dulcie,—her good, obedient daughter, without, as she had imagined, any will of her own,—Dulcie to have taken a step of which scarcely one girl in a thousand would have been capable! She had never protested her love, never re-

belled for one moment against her mother's fiat that she was not to see Noel any more, but had simply walked out of the house and married him!

Repressing, with an almost superhuman effort, her wrath against Morton, she said, in an unnaturally quiet voice,—

"You had better go back to Miss Dulcie, and remain with her. I will have inquiries made about—at the hospital. I suppose it is unnecessary to caution you against allowing a word of this to be known in the house. If—if Mr. Trevor is killed, perhaps nothing ever need be known."

Morton retired, hardly able to believe that no worse thing had befallen her.

Mrs. Vernon, left alone, leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and gave herself over to meditation. All her fondest hopes destroyed,—her ambition crushed! And what dreadful disgrace might not come upon her! If this man died, there would probably be an inquest. The whole thing would be published in the papers. Her daughter's name would be dragged through the mire. Suddenly it occurred to her that the marriage might not be legal, after all. Dulcie was a ward in chancery. She resolved to go at once to her lawyer, who was an old and trusted friend and a bachelor. Hastily she put on her bonnet. The brougham, which she had ordered for three o'clock, must have been at the door some time.

Mr. Benson, her solicitor, had chambers within ten minutes' drive of Grosvenor Street. She was fortunate enough to find him at home and alone, and was ushered immediately into his presence.

"Mr. Benson," she said, the instant the door closed upon the clerk, "I am in dreadful trouble."

Mr. Benson had never seen his handsome, distinguished client so agitated. He entertained a great regard for her,—she was such a sensible woman, with such an excellent head, such sound judgment. She never took up his time when he was busy with chattering about irrelevant matter, as most ladies are in the habit of doing, but always kept to the point,—knew what she wanted, and said it in a few words. In society she was quite different: extremely agreeable and conversational,—gave excellent din-

ners and undeniable wine. She was one of Mr. Benson's favorite clients, and he was sincerely concerned to see her in trouble, although in his professional capacity he was not given to being demonstrative.

"I am very sorry to hear it," he said, handing her to a chair,—*"very sorry indeed."* Then, seating himself, he prepared to listen.

Mrs. Vernon's habitual self-control wavered; her voice trembled; there were even tears in her eyes, so terrible and crushing was the blow that had fallen upon her. During the recital, which was of an astounding nature to Mr. Benson, he was compelled now and then to ejaculate, *"Dear me! dear me!"* as a relief to his feelings. He had known Dulcie from a child,—thought of her as a child still,—a good, obedient, well-brought-up, pretty child, thoroughly under her mother's control, and without a will of her own. He offered up a little mental thanksgiving that he had neither wife nor daughter to bring misfortune and anxiety upon him.

Mrs. Vernon, having given a rapid outline of her dreadful case, attacked the all-absorbing point of interest.

"Surely," she cried, "this marriage cannot be legal. Dulcie, being a ward in chancery, cannot be married without the Lord Chancellor's permission. And she is not of age. The man must have told all sorts of deliberate falsehoods to get the registrar to marry them."

Mr. Benson looked thoughtful and gloomy.

"Surely," cried Mrs. Vernon, with increased agitation, "I have heard of a man being imprisoned for marrying a ward in chancery!"

"I am afraid," remarked Mr. Benson, despondingly, "that once the ceremony has been performed it cannot be annulled. You see, the responsibility of the court of chancery regards the property, not the person, of its wards. I believe all the court can do under the circumstances is to summon the husband to appear before it, and to insist upon the property being settled in a manner which it approves."

"But if," cried poor Mrs. Vernon, nearly distracted—"if the man has told all sorts of lies to the registrar!"

"On that point I am not absolutely certain, but I will make inquiries at once. You say, however, that the



young man has sustained serious, perhaps mortal, injuries. In that case——”

Mr. Benson paused.

Mrs. Vernon was afraid to speak her thoughts aloud.

“It is important that inquiry should be made as to his state,” suggested Mr. Benson.

“Yes,” she assented, “but how? I cannot send. I am only too anxious, if possible, to avoid being in any way brought into this dreadful business. He may” (dropping her voice) “die without recovering consciousness.”

“But he has friends, relatives, I suppose? Do you not think he will have taken some one into his confidence? Who were the witnesses?”

“My maid and the registrar’s clerk, I believe.”

“Your maid! Dear me! dear me! that respectable person I have seen with you! I fear there are no longer any trustworthy servants left.”

“No, indeed,” replied Mrs. Vernon, with pardonable bitterness.

“I think,” pursued Mr. Benson, after a lengthy pause, “the best way will be for me to call at the hospital myself and inquire after the young man. I shall simply allow them to imagine that I was a by-stander at the time of the accident, and call to make inquiries out of sympathy.”

“Thank you, thank you,” cried Mrs. Vernon, eagerly. “And you will let me know?”

“I will come round to your house afterwards, as though for a friendly call.”

Mrs. Vernon drove away with the load at her heart as heavy as when she arrived.

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## CHAPTER IV.

SOME two hours later, Mr. Benson was ushered into Mrs. Vernon’s boudoir. He had called at the hospital, had seen the house-surgeon, and learned that Mr. Trevor was still insensible, and that no opinion could be given at present whether he would recover or not. A note-book contain-



ing several bank-notes and cards with his name and the address of a military club had been found upon him. The hall-porter of the club had been communicated with, and three or four gentlemen had been down to ask after Mr. Trevor. The cabman stated that he took up the gentleman and a lady near the top of Berkeley Square, and was driving to Duke Street, when the collision occurred. The lady, Mr. Benson was informed, had not been heard of: it was believed that she had been assisted into a shop. If she was a friend or relative, it was supposed she would have sent to make inquiries; but Mr. Benson's interlocutor intimated, with a significant smile, that it was improbable she would be heard of any more.

"So much the better!" groaned Mrs. Vernon. "Let them think anything,—anything rather than the dreadful truth! I have determined," she went on, "to leave England for the present. If this frightful affair should come out, I shall never hold up my head again."

"But, my dear lady," replied Mr. Benson, shaking his head, "it is impossible to conjecture what may happen, and I think you should certainly be on the spot. If—if—" hesitating, "Mr. Trevor should recover, and the marriage is a legal one, there is no question that——"

"If," repeated Mrs. Vernon, with energy, "such a misfortune should happen, I will at all events have things done decently and in order. I shall insist on a formal engagement, and on the marriage taking place in church. And then," with a burst of anger she found it impossible to restrain, "they may go where they please, and I shall wash my hands of them forever."

Mr. Benson did not expostulate: he thought his client's irritation was very natural indeed under the circumstances.

"Well, well, we must hope for the best!" he remarked, soothingly; but whether the best meant Noel's death, he scarcely knew himself.

"To-morrow morning I will go to the registry office, and see whether the proper formalities were gone through, and if due notice was given: if not, we may be able to question the legality of the marriage. Probably the young man was in too great a hurry to ask for the certificate, as it was certainly not found upon him. I will

make every possible inquiry, and should strongly advise you to elicit as much information as possible from your daughter and the maid. I will also call again at St. George's and make inquiry for the patient; or perhaps my better plan will be to ask at his club. You may rely upon my sending you the earliest information on both points."

Then Mr. Benson took his leave.

Mrs. Vernon had all the evening before her to reflect in. Dulcie remained in her room, with Morton in attendance. Mrs. Vernon felt the greatest repugnance to seeing her daughter, against whom she was deeply angered. She divined that all the obstinacy of Dulcie's nature was aroused. She was conscious that the betrayal of her own feelings would be unwise, and yet it was impossible to treat the girl with any show of affection or sympathy. Of the latter, indeed, she did not feel a particle, and simply regarded the accident as a judgment on an undutiful and headstrong child. The one vital point was whether the marriage was legal or not, and for that knowledge she would have to wait, at all events, until the morrow. Angry as she was with Morton, much as she would have liked to punish her, she was aware that she was more likely to learn what she wanted from her than from Dulcie, and thought it better to make her the medium of communication between herself and her daughter. And, besides, knowing how people of her class are prone to exaggerate, and thinking exaggeration might be useful in this case, she saw the expediency of letting a good deal of what she had to say to Dulcie filter through the maid.

When Morton came to assist her in dressing, she remarked, in a quiet but very impressive voice,—

"I am not at present going to say anything about the manner in which you have betrayed my confidence. You have helped Miss Dulcie into a very serious predicament, the consequences of which it is impossible to foresee."

Morton's tears began to fall.

"You may," continued Mrs. Vernon, severely, "have been the means of ruining her whole life." (The tears began to rain.) "She is a young girl quite ignorant of the world. Without you she could never have carried out this wild and foolish project."

Here Morton required the support of the wardrobe, whilst she rubbed her eyes and nose to a crimson hue.

"The accident," pursued Mrs. Vernon, solemnly, "seems nothing less than a judgment; and it is more than likely this—young man will pay the penalty of his life for his wickedness."

Sobs.

"He is still unconscious: he may not live the night through. In any case, the ceremony performed to-day is illegal, as he made false representations. As Miss Dulcie is a ward in chancery, the consent of the court is required before she can marry. Any one marrying a ward in chancery without the Lord Chancellor's consent is liable to imprisonment. You can tell Miss Dulcie all this, and what a very narrow escape she has had. I think it better not to see her again myself to-night. If," as Morton still sobbed hysterically, "you wish to atone for the dreadful injury you have already done both to her and to me, you will do all you can to prevent any suspicion of what has occurred getting abroad. Above all, beware of going to the hospital or helping to communicate with Mr. Trevor should he recover, which is more than doubtful, or you may be had up before the Lord Chancellor for aiding a conspiracy, and may find yourself in a very serious position."

This last suggestion nearly terrified Morton into a fit, as it was intended to do.

She went back to Dulcie, and poured such a terrible story into her ears that the girl, who was a thorough coward, felt her grief for Noel almost swallowed up by her fears for herself, and no longer tried to prevail on Morton to go to the hospital as she had previously done. Indeed, Morton affirmed her belief that poor Mr. Trevor was a corpse already, and wrung her hands, bewailing her own weakness and wickedness in ever having allowed herself to be persuaded to assist in such a course of deceit and treachery.

"Why didn't you tell me, Miss Dulcie," she said (in the afternoon she had called her "ma'am," but, now that she no longer regarded the marriage as valid, she returned to her usual mode of address),—"why didn't you tell me that you were a ward in chancery, and that we might all



be locked up in prison for this? I call it cruel of you,—and me who has my bread to earn, and could never get a place again once I'd been in jail!"

"I never knew it mattered," stammered Dulcie.

"But you knew you was not twenty-one, miss," said Morton, "and you should not have allowed Mr. Trevor to go telling a pack of lies about you. And, though I don't like to think it of him, and he perhaps lying dead this minute, he may have known all the time it wasn't lawful, and may have enticed you into it so that he might back out again if he wanted to. I am sure you ought to go on your knees and thank the Almighty for that accident, or goodness knows what you might have come to! I'm sure the only wonder is your ma hasn't put me and my boxes outside the door before this!"

Dulcie was dumb with misery. To have lost the sympathy and co-operation of Morton was almost the severest blow of all.

Mrs. Vernon would indeed have had reason to congratulate herself on her diplomacy could she have witnessed the scene that was taking place overhead. She was terribly perplexed and distressed: the most poignant fear of all was lest this disgraceful story should get abroad, and, in spite of Mr. Benson's opinion, she resolved to quit the country for the time being, even if she were compelled to return to it. On the one hand, she pictured the horrors of an inquest; on the other, Noel recovered, coming to claim his wife. Yes, the only thing for it was flight: she would go down to Dover the following afternoon, and proceed next day to Paris, leaving her address with Mr. Benson only. But lest he should dissuade her from her intention, she determined not to communicate it to him until after it had become an accomplished fact.

When Morton appeared to assist her in undressing, she put a few more questions to her. Had any one in the house the smallest suspicion of Miss Dulcie's meeting with Mr. Trevor? No, Morton declared eagerly that not a soul knew of his existence as far as she was aware. What explanation had been given of Miss Dulcie's condition on her return home in the morning? Morton replied that she had told them down-stairs that, having some important work to finish, she had left Miss Dulcie



to do her shopping alone; that her young lady had got into a hansom to come home, that the horse had fallen down and she been thrown out, and that Mrs. Vernon was very angry at her having been about the streets alone. This was plausible enough, and Mrs. Vernon's mind was relieved.

"I intend, if possible," she informed Morton, "to leave London to-morrow afternoon. You can be putting things together; but on no account tell Miss Dulcie to-night."

Morton obeyed. She was really relieved at the idea of going away, so frightened was she lest she should be summoned before the Lord Chancellor, whom she vaguely thought of as a terrible being. Had Dulcie shown a bold front, and been strong and determined, she might have retained her influence over Morton; but in an emergency weakness despises weakness and is apt to turn to the strong, and Morton went over to the side of her mistress in the hope of securing her own safety.

Dulcie had not the smallest anchor of hope to cling to. Noel was lost to her; worse thought still, Noel had betrayed her. If he were killed, she had made up her mind in the afternoon to wear widow's weeds for him; but now, if she was not his lawful wife, where should she hide her head from this disgrace should the story of it get about? She was in a truly pitiable state of mind,—a wofully pliant condition, ready to be moulded as her mother chose if she would only screen and defend her.

Dulcie, having little common sense, being utterly ignorant of the world and exceedingly weak of character, was, when left to herself in a difficulty, like chaff before the wind. She was very pretty, and she was amiable by nature, quite fitted to take her part in the world with a strong protector at her back, but as helpless alone as a ship without a rudder. Noel's ardor and strength of will made her fancy herself strong for the time; now she was stranded on rocks, flung hither and thither at the mercy of the waves.

The next morning Mrs. Vernon had a letter from her lawyer. Mr. Trevor remained insensible. The marriage was legal and binding. She at once decided upon flight, and wrote to Mr. Benson telling him her plans.

"I shall keep you informed where I am," she wrote,

"but I do not intend to let my servants have my address: therefore I shall ask you occasionally to forward my letters when I write for them. It is, of course, unpleasant to awaken suspicions and to behave mysteriously, but for the present I have only one object, which is to prevent Mr. Trevor following us."

Mrs. Vernon's butler had been some few years in her service. She summoned him, and informed him of her intended departure. Her tone and manner were so natural that the man, although he had a shrewd suspicion that there was something at the bottom of this sudden journey more than met the eye, had nothing to confirm it.

"I have made up my mind in a great hurry, Haynes," said his lady, affably. "I am tired of this fog and smoke, and want to get to a pleasanter climate. I cannot give you any address at present, as I shall perhaps only stay a night in Paris, but will let you know as soon as possible where to forward my letters. We shall most likely return very soon: be prepared to hear that we are on our way back at any moment."

Mrs. Vernon saw Dulcie for the first time that day when she got into the brougham which was to take them to the railway-station. She was very pale, and looked utterly wretched, but her mother, instead of compassionating her, felt nothing but deep and bitter anger against her. Not a word was exchanged between them. Dulcie was frightened as well as sullen, and Mrs. Vernon had come to the conclusion that the best and safest plan would be to avoid all mention of this dreadful matter for the present. She did really and honestly hope that Noel would die, and so free her from the most terrible dilemma that ever happened to an unfortunate woman. It was not a very cheerful prospect to think of having for her only society a companion who felt for her and for whom she felt a smothered hostility; and she resolved to hasten at once to the south of France, where she would meet old friends, or make new acquaintances, and not be thrown entirely upon her disobedient daughter for companionship.

Mrs. Vernon disliked the continent, and was fond of London,—particularly fond of her home. She liked her own comfort, her regular mode of life, the pleasant society amidst which she moved. Well off, the mother of a pretty

marriageable daughter who had a fortune of her own, her position had been a very agreeable one; but now shame, disgrace, bitter disappointment, had overtaken her, and she felt oppressed and worried to such a degree that she could scarcely contemplate the future with calmness.

It happens occasionally, by a merciful dispensation, that when things are looking their blackest some consoling incident brings a break in our despair; and now a simple though very fortunate occurrence came as a perfect god-send to Mrs. Vernon. She and Dulcie had taken their places in the Dover train. Presently the door of the carriage opened, and two more ladies were admitted,—one quite young, but very sickly and delicate-looking. She was helped in by an older lady and a maid, who busied themselves with wraps and cushions in making the invalid comfortable.

Mrs. Vernon at once recognized in the mother, as she evidently was, a once intimate friend and schoolfellow, of whom, however, she had seen nothing for years. For the moment, this lady was far too much occupied with the invalid to remark the other occupants of the carriage, and it was only just as the train was about to start that her eyes met those of Mrs. Vernon, and a sudden light of recognition and inquiry dawned in them. Then very cordial greetings were interchanged. The daughters were presented, and Mrs. Vernon, to her unspeakable relief, was no longer *tête-à-tête* with Dulcie.

"We are on our way to Nice," said Mrs. Chester. "To-night we sleep at the 'Lord Warden,' to-morrow go on to Paris, and then by stages to the end of our journey, as my little girl"—affectionately—"cannot bear much fatigue."

Mrs. Vernon at once decided that she would make her movements agree with theirs. Not only had she a liking for her old friend, but she felt it would be everything, both for herself and Dulcie, not to be thrown much upon each other's society in their present mood.

"My son will join us to-night," added Mrs. Chester. "Dear fellow! it is so good of him to leave his hunting, and he dislikes going abroad so much; but he knew we should be nervous travelling without a gentleman, and



agreed quite willingly to take us and fetch us home again. We cannot get on without him: can we, Lilah?"

"No, indeed;" and the small, wan face of the invalid lighted up.

"You have only one son, I think," asked Mrs. Vernon.

"One son and one daughter. And this, I believe,"—with a kind look at Dulcie,—*"is your only treasure?"*

"My only one," replied Mrs. Vernon, trying hard to put a little motherly warmth into her words and her glance at Dulcie. Dulcie, too, essayed a feebly responsive smile.

All the way to Dover the two elder ladies chatted together, becoming deeply interested in their reminiscences of by-gone days. The meeting gave genuine pleasure to both. Before they reached their destination they had agreed that the journey to the south should be taken in each other's company.

Dulcie was amiable, and had pretty manners. She was kind to the little invalid, and helped to make her more comfortable; and Lilah, who was very much attracted by good looks, took a great fancy to her.

The party dined together in Mrs. Chester's sitting-room, and about nine o'clock Sir John arrived. He had succeeded his grandfather in the baronetcy, his father having died only one month earlier.

He was not a little surprised to find four ladies instead of two; but it was evidently an agreeable surprise. And when his mother hastened to tell him that they were all going to travel south together, he expressed frank satisfaction. Dulcie was very pretty. He liked pretty girls. She had a pleasing manner, and he was wont to pronounce manner *"half the battle."*

For his own part, he was a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow, whom it would have been impossible to mistake for anything but an Englishman,—with blue eyes, remarkably good teeth, and the frankest, pleasantest smile imaginable.

When the party retired, after cordial good-night greetings, three at least out of the five congratulated themselves on the fortuitous meeting. Mrs. Chester thought it would be so nice for her dear boy to have a pretty girl to beguile him, and reflected how pleasant Mrs. Vernon's companionship would be for herself; Mrs. Vernon had a load taken from her breast on being relieved from a pain-



ful and prolonged *tête-à-tête* with her daughter ; Sir John was delighted at the prospect of travelling with pretty Dulcie. Dulcie herself was too wretched to indulge in any pleasant anticipations, although she was thankful not to be left alone with her mother. Lilah, who was inclined to be exacting and jealous, was half afraid that she would not receive her due share of attention from her adored brother. Morton's satisfaction was unbounded. Instead of travelling alone, she would have the society of the lady's-maid and footman, and this agreeable knowledge materially assisted her to return to her usual cheerful frame of mind.

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## CHAPTER V.

IN spite of this piece of good fortune, Mrs. Vernon's feelings were far from enviable. Her daughter was really married,—married to a worthless adventurer, as she chose to consider poor Noel. Worldly and ambitious, she had determined that Dulcie should make a good marriage, and with this in view had rejoiced at her good looks and had made the most of her in every way. She should marry a man of wealth, position, perhaps of title. Why not? She was exceptionally pretty ; she had money of her own : she might marry *any one*. And now this fair fabric of hopes had fallen like a house of cards, dissolved in mist like a castle in Spain. And the child on whom she had placed all her hopes had not only disappointed her, but had disgraced her in the most heartless and cruel manner.

It seemed inconceivable, when she remembered Dulcie's yielding disposition. She had never shown any will of her own,—had never, at all events, attempted to combat her mother's : how, in so short a time, had a man gained sufficient influence over her to cause her to act in a manner totally opposed to her natural weakness and timidity? Then Mrs. Vernon thought with a pang of Sir John Chester. He was not, perhaps, so great a match as she had imagined for Dulcie ; but compared with Noel Trevor he was a splendid alliance. And here these young people

would be thrown together with exceptional opportunities. It was easy to see that Sir John already admired Dulcie, and he was so good-looking and pleasant that a girl could not fail to like and be attracted by him. It even crossed Mrs. Vernon's mind that should Sir John fall in love with Dulcie the position might become extremely embarrassing. She had told Morton distinctly that the marriage was null and void. Morton had of course repeated this to Dulcie, and Dulcie, unable to communicate with Noel, and without the means of discovering anything for herself, was tolerably certain to take it for granted that she was free. Well, the man *might* die, and Mrs. Vernon most sincerely hoped he would.

The next day was fine: the sun shone, the sea was calm. Sir John's attention was at first entirely taken up by his little invalid sister; his strong arms carried her on board the boat, he placed her with all a woman's gentleness in the most comfortable position, and saw that she had everything she could possibly want. A deck-cabin had been engaged for her, but she preferred to lie out in the fresh air. Her mother, the maid, and the footman hovered about, but it was her brother who did everything for her and to whom she looked to supply her every want. Her eyes watched him jealously when, having devoted himself to her comfort and said many gay and cheery words to her, he went and sat down by Dulcie.

Poor Dulcie! her brain was in a whirl. She had never yet been abroad. As she watched the sunlit cliffs lessening in the distance, she told herself that she was leaving all she loved behind,—leaving Noel dying, perhaps dead. A superstitious terror crossed her that this was a judgment upon her for having disobeyed her mother: almost for the first time, the enormity of the wrong she had committed dawned upon her. She and Noel were to have gone to Paris together, and now he was lying in a hospital and she was on her way to Paris with her mother. If only that awful doubt of him could be set at rest!—if she could be assured that he had not deceived her willingly, knowingly!—if there were any one she could turn to for counsel, in whom she could confide! It was a relief to her at first that her mother made no reference to the subject; she had dreaded her anger unspeakably, her severe re-

criminations; but now she felt this horrible uncertainty to be almost worse.

Sir John noticed how pale she was, and that her eyes shone with tears, but he only thought that she was possibly suffering from physical qualms, knowing what delicate creatures women were, and that, though there was no motion in the boat worth speaking of, it was possible she was feeling, or fancying she felt, unwell. So he engaged for a time in conversation with Mrs. Vernon, who exerted her very considerable powers of pleasing for his benefit, and only returned to Dulcie when they were nearing Calais. She was better by this time; the fresh air had braced her nerves; his face was pleasant to look upon, his cheery voice was inspiring, and she was able to smile at him, and to respond to his remarks with something of her usual manner. For Dulcie, if weak in character and not to be classed among clever people, was by no means deficient in intelligence, and had, as a rule, a very fair amount of small-talk at her command. And during the journey to Paris she was not insensible of the advantage of having a young, well-looking man of the party, anxious to please her and thoughtful for her comfort. He was bright, active, alert, saw to everything, and did not for a moment lose his good temper on one or two of those critical occasions when a travelling Englishman is prone to show the cloven foot. His first care was always for Lilah; and after her the other ladies came in for his attentions and good offices.

Lilah was tired out when they arrived in Paris, and had to be put to bed at once: the rest of the party dined together in the restaurant of the hotel. After dinner, Mrs. Chester went up to Lilah, and Sir John suggested, if Mrs. and Miss Vernon were not tired, he would take them out to have a look at the shops. Both were glad enough to accept his proposal: each has a horror of being left alone with the other. Mrs. Vernon was afraid of a point-blank question from Dulcie which she would be compelled to answer truthfully. Dulcie feared her mother's reproaches. Sir John's company was a godsend to both.

The night was clear, and not cold for the time of year. The lights, the gay shops, the entire change of scene, and, last not least, the young man's cheeriness and vivacity,



all helped to put them more at their ease and to dispel the dreadful gloom which oppressed their hearts.

When Dulcie retired for the night, and referred, in Morton's presence, to the late terrible event, the maid showed herself the reverse of sympathetic, and said, with some shortness, that the best thing her young lady could possibly do was to forget all about that foolish affair, and to thank Providence things had happened as they did, or what a position she might have been in now! For Morton, turncoat that she was, had already dismissed Noel from her thoughts and affections, and had begun to consider Sir John as a much more appropriate suitor for Dulcie. So she discouraged all mention of Noel, and was not in the least moved by Dulcie's tears and reproaches.

The next day Lilah was unable to leave her room. Fatigue had brought on one of the severe headaches she was subject to, and she remained in a darkened room, watched over alternately by her mother and the maid, and was only able to bear her adored brother's presence for a moment, when he was admitted to kiss and press her thin little hand without speaking. He was therefore at liberty to escort Mrs. Vernon and her daughter shopping; insisted on giving them luncheon at "Voisin's;" drove afterwards with them in the Bois, and took them to the theatre in the evening. Mrs. Vernon, who knew French thoroughly, did all the talking that was required in that language, and explained the play to Sir John, who was as ignorant of French, and as shy of speaking it, as most young Britons. He came to the conclusion that she was one of the most delightful women he had ever met in his life, and divided his attentions almost equally between her and Dulcie, whom he thought "a dear, nice, modest little girl!"

Golden opinions were flying about all round. When Mrs. Vernon reflected on the situation and on possibilities, she was almost driven to despair. She saw in Sir John a probable suitor for Dulcie. In her dreams, perhaps, she had thought of a son-in-law of higher rank and larger fortune; but this charming young fellow, this devoted son and brother, would have had small difficulty in obtaining her consent. He would most likely, with all the opportunities that would be given him, fall in love with



Dulcie and wish to marry her, and Dulcie, perish the thought!—Dulcie was a married woman already, and that fatal symbol of her folly lay in the drawer of Mrs. Vernon's dressing-case.

A dreadful sense of uneasiness stole over her as she remembered how she had given Morton to understand that the marriage was illegal. Dulcie no doubt considered herself free; and suppose she, forgetting her grief and Noel Trevor in time, should come back to look with favorable eyes on Sir John! Oh, if that wretch would only die! The afternoon of her arrival in Paris, Mrs. Vernon had telegraphed to Mr. Benson, and the second morning following she received a letter from him.

"Mr. Trevor," he wrote, "still lies in the same critical condition. I think you were a little precipitate in leaving England, and I must remind you that you ought to have apprised the court of chancery of the marriage of Miss Vernon; also that before taking her out of the country it was necessary to obtain the sanction of the court to your doing so."

Mrs. Vernon heeded this not at all. She was out of England, thank God! and out of England she would remain. Dulcie having worked upon Morton's feelings with extreme difficulty, the maid ventured to ask her mistress whether Mr. Trevor still lived.

Mrs. Vernon paused a moment before replying, then said, in her cold, awe-inspiring voice,—

"Mr. Trevor remains in the same condition. If he should die, I will tell you; but do not mention the subject to me again." Then, as an after-thought, "If he does not die, he may be an idiot for the rest of his life."

Morton made the very most of this suggestion, and drew a lively picture to Dulcie of the horror of having an imbecile husband, and of her good fortune in not really being his wife. The idea took very forcible possession of Dulcie, and made her thoughts of Noel full of terror and distress, instead of the love and sympathy which had characterized them hitherto. She welcomed anything that distracted her from these dreadful reflections, and laughed and talked to Sir John with a gayety which he little suspected was forced. It did not, however, deceive her mother.

Mrs. Chester was delighted that her dear son should be so well amused. Like all good women, she was a match-maker, and, although she had everything to lose and nothing to gain by his marriage, she was quite prepared, when his choice fell on some nice, good girl, to say, "Bless you, my children!" and vacate the home to which she was so fondly attached. And Dulcie, so pretty, gentle, well brought-up, seemed a daughter-in-law eminently to be desired. In their school-days she had always looked up to Margaret Lockwood as a superior being, to be admired and respected: a girl brought up under such a mother could not fail to be full of virtue and merit.

Sir John himself, though not shy, but, on the contrary, much inclined for women's society, had never, so far as she knew, been seriously in love or proposed for the hand of any woman. There was no little episode in his life of which she and most other people were ignorant.

At one-and-twenty he had for the first and only time in his life fallen desperately in love. It was during the first season he spent in London, when his mother was living quietly at home in the country and knew no more of his doings than he was pleased to tell her. Sir John was a thoroughly honorable, good-hearted young fellow, and, as his fortune would have it, the siren who fascinated him was a married woman. She was handsome, clever, and several years older than himself. For some little time she played with him and his heart as she would, and the condition of his mind halted between ecstasy and misery. With his strong sense of honor, it was intolerable to him to sit at the table and take the hand of a man whom in his heart he was betraying, and he had a terrible time with his conscience. And, as it does not often happen when the blood is in its heyday and the siren smiles, conscience got the better of passion. Jack (by which name he was known to all his intimates), having fought a valiant fight and being sorely wounded in the encounter, took the only refuge of a brave man in such warfare, and fled. He went to America for three months, spent the winter down at home hunting vigorously, and took good care to avoid the society which had been so dangerously dear to him. And from that time until now, though he had liked and admired several women, he had never felt

that the society of one was absolutely necessary to him ; and, knowing how severe a trial it would be to his mother, and far more to his little sick sister, to leave the Hall, he never encouraged himself to think seriously of bringing a new mistress to take the reins of government. He was still free and heart-whole ; but any day might change this happy condition and deliver him over bound and captive to the charms of some fair maiden.

Two or three days passed. Lilah was pretty well again. Her sharp, jealous eyes saw with intense dissatisfaction the pleasant familiar terms on which her brother and Dulcie stood, and terrible forebodings haunted her. She was silent and irritable ; no one could please her. Poor little girl ! she had so few pleasures ; her lot seemed so hard to her. Never to be able to do anything like any one else ! The idea of not being first with her idolized brother was unendurable, and the possibility of leaving that home which was the dearest spot of earth to her increased her melancholy and irritability fourfold.

“ Why did you ask those people to join us ? ” she said petulantly to her mother.

Mrs. Chester returned soothingly that she thought it would be so nice for all of them to have pleasant companions. But Lilah answered with irritation that it was not at all nice,—that they took Johnnie away from her, and that most likely they would do all they could to catch him, and that she and her mother would be turned out of their dear, darling home, and then perhaps she (her mother) would be pleased with what she had done ! And poor Lilah began to cry bitterly, and Mrs. Chester was at her wits' end to pacify her. Lilah was even irritable to her brother ; but he was so kind and forbearing that it was impossible to remain angry with him : she therefore contented herself by increasing her exactions fourfold and insisting on his company at all times and seasons.

Not selfish, as many men are in their youth and strength, he was so pitying and tender towards her frailness and weakness that many a time he yielded to her exactions with the kindest grace in the world when he would fain have been doing something else. And he was rewarded by the clasp of that poor little thin hand, the look of adoration and gratitude in the eloquent eyes of the suffer-



ing girl when he sat beside her couch, or took her driving, or unhesitatingly obeyed some rather imperious and perhaps inconvenient behest.

"Poor little girl!" he said tenderly to himself, "she might have been the strong and I the weak and sickly one!" He never forgot his father's words, spoken shortly before he died:

"Always be good to the women, Jack! Be kind to them: don't be selfish; don't do things as if they were a bore and a trouble. Young fellows are apt to think too much about themselves and their own pleasures. Don't you be like that, my boy. Be good to your mother, who is the most unselfish woman alive, and be kind to poor little Lilah, who has a sorrowful time in store for her, even at the best! If in another world we can look down on this, think, my boy, that I shall be watching you, and blessing you if you are kind to them."

And Jack, who loved his father dearly, never forgot those words, though he had such a good heart that even without them it is very likely he would not have failed in duty or kindness towards these weak women who depended upon him.

After three days in Paris, Lilah was well enough to continue the journey. Their next halting-place was Lyons, where they stayed one night only. Lilah detested travelling, and was anxious to get to her journey's end. But she was so fatigued when they reached Marseilles that two nights and a day had to be spent there in order to recruit her strength.

Dulcie was charmed with the bright town of Marseilles, and here, as Mrs. Vernon was not very well, she and Jack were thrown a good deal in each other's company. He walked and drove with her to see all the objects of interest, and her even spirits and natural brightness partially returned to her, and she began to forget her misery and to look once more upon the bright side of life. The events of a few days before she came to regard as a nightmare. She was beginning to feel indignant against Noel, who she now taught herself to believe had laid a trap for her. Morton was careful to foster any thoughts unfavorable to the poor fellow in her young lady's mind; and Dulcie shuddered with horror as Morton dwelt on his



possible idiocy, and related her own experience of an imbecile young man,—a member of a family in which she had once lived. All Dulcie now hoped was that she would never see or hear of Noel again.

Mrs. Vernon's frame of mind was anything but pleasant. Her tactics had been almost too successful, and she began to think, not without horror, of the terrible position in which her daughter might find herself if she should come to be attached to Sir John Chester. Marry him she certainly could not whilst her husband lived, and even should he die it would, she feared, be necessary that the dreadful story should be confessed.

And it was not one that a lover, especially an honorable, straightforward young fellow, would like very much to hear! And, besides, Mrs. Vernon had a terrible intuition that Noel would not die. What should she do and say if some day Dulcie came blushing and smiling to tell her that Sir John had proposed, and that she had accepted him?

Mrs. Vernon was greatly tempted to wish that Dulcie had never been born, or that she had succumbed to the attack of scarlet fever which had nearly cost her her life when a child.

Her heart sank as she watched Sir John's manner to Dulcie, and the favor with which Dulcie seemed to regard him in return; nor was she reassured by the affectionate interest Mrs. Chester displayed in her daughter. She read plainly what was in that guileless lady's mind, and it caused her to groan in spirit. Meantime, she heard from Mr. Benson that young Trevor was alive, and would probably live, but that he showed no signs of mental consciousness.

"If things go much further," said the distracted mother to herself, "I must let Dulcie know the horrid truth." Then suddenly a thought struck her. "Reine is at Cannes. I will get her to come to us. Perhaps Sir John will fall in love with her."

## CHAPTER VI.

THE morning after their arrival at Nice was perfect. The waves dancing in the sunshine were blue as the vault of heaven which they reflected; the sun was brilliant as a June sun in England; everywhere children offered roses and orange-blossoms, bright anemones, and great violets for sale. Sir John escorted the ladies into the town in quest of gay-lined cotton umbrellas to protect their complexions from the too ardent gaze of Phœbus. Once there, they lingered to look at the corals, the laces, the tempting crystallized fruits, and other wares, and afterwards sat and sunned themselves on the Promenade.

"To think of this being December!" said Dulcie. "I wonder every one does not come away from the cold and the horrid fogs in England."

"It is delicious," responded Sir John; but in his heart he thought of dull gray mornings in his own land which were more exhilarating and spirit-stirring to him than all this glamour of sunshine. Still, he was well content for the present to be where he was.

"We shall have to go over to Monte Carlo and try our luck," he proceeded, turning to Mrs. Vernon. "When shall it be? to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," responded Mrs. Vernon, "my niece Mrs. Chandos is coming over from Cannes to spend a couple of days with us: so I must be here to receive her. But that is no reason why you should not go; and perhaps you will take us another day."

"Oh, we must all make our *début* together!" he laughed. "I am not a gambler. I shall lose my five pounds and then come away; but it would bore me to go alone. I only care for the outing, and an outing without pleasant company isn't worth having."

"I shall like to introduce you to my niece," said Mrs. Vernon. "She is a very interesting person,—clever and original."

"I shall be charmed," he replied; but mentally he opined that a clever and original woman would be a bore

and a wet blanket, and, stealing a glance at Dulcie, he thought how infinitely preferable was a pretty little girl like this with not brains enough to make a man feel like a fool beside her.

"She is a poetess, too," Mrs. Vernon continued, adding to his disrelish of her picture by every word. "Her poems have been a good deal talked about,—very much praised and very much abused, which is a certain proof that they are above mediocrity."

"I shall be horribly afraid of her," returned Sir John. "Does she wear spectacles and affect the divided skirt?"

"Oh," chimed in Dulcie, "Reine is very pretty and dresses beautifully."

"I do not think the words 'very pretty' describe her accurately," said Mrs. Vernon. "She has a face full of charm and intelligence, and, if she likes you and lays herself out to be pleasant to you, you will probably think her more than pretty."

But Sir John did not feel drawn to the lady in question, and had a presentiment, as trustworthy as most presentiments are, that he should not like her. He was even minded to go off to Monaco alone on purpose to avoid her.

In the afternoon they went to the Casino and listened to the band, dined at the *table d'hôte*, and spent the evening with Lilah in the sitting-room, each vying with the other in attentions to the little invalid.

It was at luncheon the following day that Sir John saw Reine Chandos for the first time. One glance showed him that the impression he had formed of her in his mind was totally incorrect; in ten minutes he had forgotten that she was clever and a blue-stocking, and thought her one of the most fascinating creatures he had ever seen. She was not beautiful,—no! that was not the word that expressed her: he felt as if he wanted an even better one. Her features were small and delicate, she had eyes like brown velvet, her hair was dark with a dash of chestnut in it, her hands were exquisitely delicate. She smiled at the young man, whose good looks and frank, pleasant manner pleased her, and she talked to him in a gay strain that had nothing to remind him of poetess or strong-minded woman. For Reine was the most impressionable of her sex, and liked or disliked almost at a glance.



Sir John pleased her. With swift intuition she saw in him a suitable husband for Dulcie, and was prepared to extend a cordial welcome to him as a member of the family. As for him, he found the greatest difficulty in taking his eyes from her face, and Mrs. Vernon was quick to recognize that the mental wish she had formed was quite likely to be fulfilled. Any maternal jealousy that, under other circumstances, might have been awakened in her breast was laid now by the thought of the painful complications that would occur should Sir John have any serious ideas about Dulcie.

It had been arranged that Mrs. Chester, Lilah, and her brother should go for a drive that afternoon to Villefranche, and Dulcie had been invited to accompany them. Mrs. Vernon and Reine were to follow in one of the delightful little pony-carriages which abound at Nice. Their young charioteer drove from the small seat at the back, and, as he did not understand a word of English, the two ladies were able to converse with absolute freedom.

For the last few days Mrs. Vernon had deliberated whether Reine should be informed of the terrible event: she was perfectly trustworthy, and had plenty of common sense, but still the mother shrank from putting any one in possession of this miserable secret, though it weighed so intolerably upon her that she felt that to share it would be the greatest relief.

They were driving along at a smart pace, and, at a curve in the road, came in sight of the rest of the party, whose carriage preceded theirs.

"I think, Aunt Margaret," said Reine, gayly, "that this looks very promising. Sir John seems an extremely nice young fellow, and will make you an excellent son-in-law."

As Mrs. Vernon made no reply, Reine turned to look at her, and was surprised at the gloom and despondency expressed on her features.

"Why, auntie, do you not approve of him?" she asked, in a tone of surprise.

"I approve of him entirely," rejoined Mrs. Vernon, "but—but——"

"Is he poor?" asked Reine, jumping at once to the only possible obstacle she could imagine.

Again Mrs. Vernon was silent for a moment, and looked



away at the blue waves sparkling so merrily in the sunshine. Should she or should she not tell Reine, was the question which for the moment absorbed her.

Reine was silent and waited. She conjectured something of the doubt that was passing in Mrs. Vernon's mind, and forbore to influence her decision by pressing a question. She affected to be engrossed by the scene around her.

Mrs. Vernon knew that silence is golden,—that it is best not to confide a secret that tells against us, even to a sincere friend,—so many unforeseen things may come in to change friendship to coldness, distrust, rivalry; yet for once this strong-minded self-contained woman felt a woful need of sympathy, of help. And she really trusted Reine: she had been a true friend to Reine in her time of trial, and Reine had a grateful nature.

At last Mrs. Vernon spoke.

"My dear," she said, "I am in dreadful trouble. I believe that I should be wiser to keep it to myself, and yet the burden of it is almost too much for me to bear alone. You are the only living being with whom I would trust this horrid secret, and before I do so I must have your sacred promise that you will never breathe a word of it to any one,—that you will behave as though you were in entire ignorance of it."

Reine laid a sympathetic hand on her companion's.

"Dear auntie," she said, "you may safely trust me. I am so grieved to think you are in trouble."

"Promise!" repeated Mrs. Vernon, with a show of nervous excitement quite unusual to her.

"I promise you faithfully and truly," answered Reine, in a low, clear voice, looking into her aunt's eyes with a gaze which spoke absolute truth and sincerity.

"I can scarcely bring my mind to speak the words," uttered Mrs. Vernon, moving uneasily: "you will think I have taken leave of my senses. Can you believe," with increasing irritation, "that wretched girl has made a clandestine marriage with an adventurer?"

Reine forgot the sea, the sunshine, the flowering trees and shrubs, which had up to this moment delighted her senses, and a look of horror that was absolutely tragic crept into her eyes.

"Dulcie!" she stammered, almost inaudibly.

"Yes," cried her aunt, "Dulcie,—Dulcie, who one thought had no will or idea of her own. Nor had she," with rising indignation: "the man found out, of course, that she had money, and worked on her feelings, and, I suppose, pretended to adore her, and so, one morning, without my knowing even that she was keeping up an acquaintance with him, she walked out of the house and was married at the registry office."

For a moment Reine was speechless; then she said,—

"But some one must have helped her! some one must have connived at it! Dulcie is the last girl in the world to plot and arrange such an affair for herself."

"Of course the man managed everything, and Dulcie had some one to aid and abet her also,—the valuable Morton."

"Morton!" echoed Reine. "But she is here with you!"

"Yes," replied her aunt, bitterly. "You may easily conjecture that, if I could, I would have turned her out of the house on the spot without a character; but I had only one idea, and that was to keep the wretched affair a secret. If I had wreaked my anger on her, she would have blazoned the story abroad in revenge, and I had great hopes the wretched man would die. And, after all, she has been useful in a way. I have never breathed one word to Dulcie on the subject, but I have given her to understand, through Morton, that the marriage is illegal."

"But," interrupted Reine, "how did you get her away from him, and why do you say you hoped he might die?"

Mrs. Vernon told her the strange story of the accident. Reine listened in wonderment that absolutely deprived her of speech. When the story came to an end, she had only one question to ask.

"But are you sure the marriage is legal? I thought a ward in chancery could not marry without the consent of the court."

"So I thought; but Mr. Benson explained to me that it is the property and not the person of the ward with which the court concerns itself. The only comfort is that he will not be able to touch her money: they will see that it is settled upon herself."

Then Reine, with a woman's instinct, inquired about Mr. Trevor's appearance; but Mrs. Vernon was far too prejudiced to give a fair account of him.

"A most ordinary young man," she said, "with nothing to say for himself."

"But," cried Reine, "the thing which baffles me is that Dulcie, after such a strange and terrible experience, should seem quite herself, quite unchanged!"

"Dulcie," said her mother, bitterly, "has no more feeling than that rock. Do you suppose a girl with a particle of heart could have acted to a devoted mother with such ruthless disregard of what she would suffer as Dulcie did in leaving me? One can scarcely expect, then, when things went wrong with her lover and caused shame and discomfort to herself, that she would retain any serious regard for him. Besides, mercifully, she is under the impression that he had entrapped her into a false marriage."

"Aunt Margaret," said Reine, very earnestly, "I think she ought to know the truth. Suppose that she and Sir John fall in love with each other: it will be a terrible predicament for every one."

"I will not tell her at present," answered Mrs. Vernon, firmly. "What guarantee have I that she would not suddenly take it into her head to run away from me and go back to him, or write to him to come to her?"

"But, if he recovers, you cannot prevent him from claiming her!"

"I am determined," replied Mrs. Vernon, "that in any case this marriage at the registry office shall remain a secret. A regular engagement shall be gone through. I shall pretend"—with a groan—"to give my consent, and there shall be a decent and proper ceremony in church. Oh, Reine!"—with tears in her eyes, a very unusual symptom of weakness with her,—“this has nearly broken my heart!"

Reine was the most sympathetic woman in the world. She cried, too, for pity of her aunt's grief, and used every effort to console and comfort her. When, a few minutes later, the carriage with the rest of the party turned and passed them on its way back, and Dulcie smiled and waved her hand to her cousin, Reine returned the gesture



gayly; then she leaned back, and marvelled how it was possible for a woman to be so heartless; but a moment later she murmured to herself,—

“How fortunate, oh, how fortunate for her! Happy girl!”

That evening the whole party dined at the *table d'hôte*. Lilah persisted that she was not tired, and was so eager to dine with the others that her wish was not opposed. Sir John sat between her and Dulcie; the three other ladies had seats immediately opposite. The young man chatted away to Lilah and Dulcie, but his eyes wandered frequently to Reine. She was more than pretty, he thought. She looked so high-bred. Her hands, he remarked, were marvellously delicate and well shaped. To meet her eyes and see her smile gave him a sensation of delight. Now and then he said a few words to her, and she responded with the charming grace she always used to those who pleased her.

There were people going about the world who averred that Mrs. Chandos was a proud, haughty, disagreeable woman, who gave herself great airs which, considering her unfortunate position, were quite unwarranted. On the other hand, those to whom she accorded her friendship and sympathy praised and belauded her in a manner almost savoring of extravagance. Sir John seemed likely to rank among the latter class.

“What a tremendous mistake I made,” he said, in a low voice full of satisfaction, to Dulcie, “when I imagined your cousin to be a blue-stockings and strong-minded! She is one of the most charming women I ever met.”

“Reine is very nice,” replied Dulcie; but the words seemed extremely tame and unsatisfactory to her auditor.

“Where can I get her books?” he continued. “I don’t care for poetry, as a rule, but I am sure I should like hers.”

“I think Tauchnitz has published them,” Dulcie answered; “but you had better not talk to Reine about them. Nothing annoys her so much as for any one to allude to her writings.”

“Really!” exclaimed Sir John. “It seems to me I should be so awfully proud if I were an author, I should want to publish the fact on the house-top. By the way,”



trying to assume an indifferent tone and coloring slightly, "is there a Mr. Chandos?"

Dulcie caught the contagion of his blush fourfold, and looked exceedingly uneasy and embarrassed.

"No," she stammered; "at least——"

But Sir John hastened to change the subject, shocked at having asked an indiscreet question.

Then he relapsed into silence, and sat wondering what her strange answer could mean. "No; at least——" Surely there must either be a husband or not. Could it be possible that——

A feeling of disquietude stole across him. Presently he raised his glance to Reine's face, and something in the expression of her eyes gave him a horrible suspicion that she knew what he was thinking about,—knew what he had asked Dulcie. He felt miserable and ashamed of himself; he dropped his eyes, and thought that he should not dare to raise them again; then, suddenly, her sweet voice struck gayly on his ear: she was asking if he had been to Monte Carlo yet.

"No," he answered, eagerly; "but we were talking of going to-morrow. Will you not come too?"

She hesitated a moment before answering.

"If, whilst you are all in the gambling-room, you will leave me outside to enjoy the lovely view, I will go," she said.

"Oh, I am not at all keen about gambling," he exclaimed, eagerly, thinking how infinitely he would prefer to stroll about the grounds with her. "I shall go in for ten minutes and try my luck and lose my money, and then I shall breathe the fresh air and look at the scenery, and I hope you won't think my company a bore."

"I am sure I shall not," replied Reine, graciously.

"Then it's a bargain," cried the young man, with sparkling eyes.

"You and Dulcie are going, of course?" said Reine, turning to her aunt, and Mrs. Vernon assented.

"Can I not go too?" pleaded Lilah, with tears in her eyes, looking eagerly at her brother.

"Of course you shall go, little one, if you are up to it," he answered, kindly; but Mrs. Chester gave him a warning shake of the head.

The next morning poor Lilah was in no condition to think of any kind of gayety: the exertions of the day before had brought on one of her severe headaches. Sir John could only just creep in on tiptoe and whisper to her that the very first day she was well enough he would take her over, and that he would bring her back a "fairing" this evening; and in return she feebly pressed his hand, unable even to speak.

Mrs. Chester remained with the invalid,—indeed, the excellent lady had a secret horror of the wicked Monte Carlo,—and Sir John escorted the other three ladies in a very proud and pleased frame of mind. He did not, however, forget his poor little sister, and on the way said to Reine, in a tone very much subdued from its natural blitheness,—

"Is it not strange how in this world some people suffer so dreadfully without any fault of their own? Look at poor, dear little Lilah, nearly always in pain. She is as good as gold, and wouldn't hurt a fly! And here am I, a great hulking fellow who does not know what an ache or a pain means!"

"I do not suppose you would hurt a fly either," replied Reine, smiling at him with a benevolent, almost a maternal, smile; and indeed she felt as though he were a nice, frank Eton boy and she a middle-aged woman.

He looked at her as if he did not quite understand. He liked her to smile at him, but he did not like her to treat him as though he were a mere lad.

Reine changed her tone.

"It is very sad for her, poor child," she said. "But, oh! how many sad things there are in the world!" And she drew such a deep, deep sigh that a wave of pity swept over Jack's sensitive heart, and he felt that she herself had some dreadful trouble of which she was thinking. Her eyes wore a far-off look, and for the moment she seemed to have forgotten his existence.

## CHAPTER VII.

WHEN they arrived at Monte Carlo, Mrs. Vernon and Dulcie, escorted by Sir John, made their way to the Casino. Reine insisted on remaining in the gardens, and was proof against all entreaties to accompany them inside the building.

"I do not like to see poor human nature in its most debased form," she said, smiling. "It is bad enough at its best."

The words impressed Sir John painfully. He did not like to hear pessimistic views from such charming lips. But he smiled, and answered,—

"I hope you won't see any very serious change for the worse in us when we come out."

"I hope not," she returned, in the same vein; and, with a little gesture of farewell, she turned and left them as they entered the Casino, and went into the gardens to a spot whence she could see the glittering sea and the sunshine flooding the red rocks.

Her thoughts travelled away from herself, and were centred upon Dulcie and the shipwreck she had made of her life. Reine, in spite of a certain amount of cynicism and disbelief which suffering had infused into her mind, was rather prone to credit what she was told, and had accepted Mrs. Vernon's version of the story and description of Noel without allowing for her aunt's prejudice. She took it for granted that Dulcie's husband was the needy adventurer represented; and she thought sorrowfully of the fate which awaited her poor unstable cousin.

She had always been fond of Dulcie, who was so fair and soft and pretty, so yielding and docile. This black sheep, this good-for-nothing fortune-hunter, would, no doubt, oppress and ill treat her, unless, for pecuniary reasons, he found it advisable to behave to her with some show of consideration. Why were women always compelled to suffer through their best affections? But then a sudden thought pulled Reine up sharply. Could Dulcie's phlegmatic nature be made to suffer very acutely?



It was only about ten days since she had been torn from the man whom it was to be presumed she loved, or thought she loved, and yet she was smiling, amused, and evidently capable of taking considerable interest in what was going on around her. And, for all she knew, he might be lying dead.

And now, with the extraordinary irony in which Fate delights, she was thrown into the society of Sir John Chester, one of the nicest, pleasantest-mannered, kindest-hearted young men imaginable, Reine said to herself. His face was an open book: only to see his kind, tender ways to his poor little sister stamped him at once the good fellow he was. What a smooth, fair-sailing voyage might Dulcie's life have been with such a helmsman! Should we ever in the future know why things happen with such cruel perversity?

Her reflections were broken in upon by hurrying feet and laughing voices.

"We have found you at last," said Sir John, in the gayest accents. "Have we been gone too long?"

Reine was more considerate than to reply that she thought it could be scarcely ten minutes since they parted.

All three faces were smiling and good-humored.

"We have broken the bank," laughed Sir John, opening his hand and exhibiting a rouleau of gold, and the two ladies followed his example and showed each a smaller one. "We have won thirty pounds between us," continued the young man, gayly. "I had the most extraordinary run of luck. I played first for myself and then for the ladies, and, by Jove! I believe if we had not stopped I should have gone on winning."

"Then you were very wise to come away," returned Reine, with a smile. "If you were to win too much, it would give you a taste of gambling, and you might not be able to tear yourself away until you had lost every shilling you possess."

Still that same kind, patronizing tone, as if he were an Eton boy! It would have vexed him, if he had not been too good-tempered and too full of admiration for her to allow himself to be ruffled.

"Let us go and have lunch, shall we?" he proposed:



and the ladies assented. Sir John went on a little in advance and ordered an elaborate *déjeuner*, and bought a beautiful spray of flowers for each of his guests.

"It would only bore you to carry bouquets about," he explained to them, "so I chose these."

Reine had many moods: to-day she was in one of her brightest. She talked with vivacity, was amused and pleased by everything, and Sir John was lost in admiration of all she said and did. Mrs. Vernon observed this, and was by no means ill pleased. Were he to fall in love with Dulcie, what a terrible dilemma she would be placed in! Unless—but no! if Noel had been going to die, he would have died before this, and Mr. Benson would have informed her of the fact by telegram.

Dulcie was pleased and complacent: all she wanted was to forget Noel, against whom she felt a dull sense of anger. Sir John was kind, and she liked him, but she had no desire for the present that either he or any other man should fall in love with her.

Luncheon was scarcely begun when Sir John, uttering an exclamation, started up and hastened to greet a man who entered. A hearty slap on the shoulder, a vigorous hand-shake, followed by a slight colloquy, and then Sir John returned to his party beaming with smiles and bringing his friend in tow.

"My cousin, Alwyne Temple," he said. They all bowed, and Reine remarked,—

"I think we met in Rome."

Mr. Temple came round and took her hand with more politeness than cordiality.

He was a remarkably handsome young man, tall, well made, with clear-cut features, rather dark than fair, well dressed, and in every way calculated to attract observation. His manner, however, precluded all idea that he had any desire to be observed: it was perfectly quiet, self-possessed, and self-reliant.

Sir John bade the waiter lay another cover, and the man put the chair and serviette between the two younger ladies, with a nice and sympathetic consideration of possible affinities.

Sir John plied his cousin with questions, and it was not until these had been responded to, and luncheon had made

considerable progress, that he remarked a decrease in Reine's vivacity. Alwyne's eyes were constantly turned upon Dulcie, and his conversation, when not given to his cousin, was entirely devoted to her.

It then occurred to Sir John that Alwyne's presence had not contributed to the general cheeriness, but rather the reverse. Before his arrival, Reine had been the life of the party; now she said very little, and her eyes no longer continued to meet his as they had done. And he came to the conclusion that this made all the difference to his pleasure.

Presently Mrs. Vernon proposed that she, with Reine and Dulcie, should leave the gentlemen to smoke and have a chat whilst they looked at the shops and strolled in the Casino gardens. But the two young men showed no disposition to be left, and begged that they might be allowed to be of the party. Sir John made his way quickly to Reine's side.

"I want you to help me choose a present for Lilah," he said, "and some flowers as well."

So they turned their steps to the florist's at the Grand Hotel, and Reine selected an exquisite basket of the choicest blossoms to be sent to meet them at the train. Then they went into a jeweller's and bought a gold bangle for the little invalid. The young man was dying to present a souvenir to his companion, but instinct told him that it would not be accepted, and he had a mortal awe of displeasing her.

When they emerged from the shop, the others were nowhere to be seen. This delighted Sir John, and Reine was far too much a woman of the world to feel, or affect, the smallest embarrassment at the circumstance.

"I suppose they are tired of waiting, and have gone on to the gardens," she said. "We must look for them."

And, side by side, they strolled in the sunshine, one of them unreasonably happy, the other placidly content.

Reine led the way to a spot commanding one of the loveliest views, just beyond the Trente-et-Quarante room. The golden roof and spires of the Casino and its gilded parapets glowed with dazzling brilliance against the wonderful blue of the sky, and the Moorish arabesques ornamenting the roulette-rooms rose, fairy-like, from the

groups of palms, cacti, and aloes planted with a cunning eye to effect. And below and around were rocks and wooded ravines, banks of exquisite flowers, glimpses of coast, sea, and sky giving an indescribable effect of gorgeous coloring which dazzled the senses, and yet, like all nature's handiwork, was harmonious in its richness and beauty.

Both stood and gazed in silence. Sir John felt as though a new era had opened in his life. He was susceptible to the beauties of nature, but to-day these were enhanced a thousandfold by the charm of the woman at whose side he stood. It was as if the sunshine that flooded the scene had penetrated his heart and was glowing and burning there. But, glancing at Reine, he felt that her thoughts were far, far away from him, and that the sun was not shining in her heart. He longed to read her thoughts; but he had not the smallest clew to help him.

Presently she moved on without speaking, and he, afraid to break the spell, followed her in silence. She took her way to the first terrace; there she paused and looked round.

"I do not see a sign of them," she remarked. "Let us sit here and wait. If they do not come, we will go and look for them at the music. It is lovely here, is it not?" she added, after a moment, with a little sigh of satisfaction.

"It is heavenly," answered the young fellow, radiantly; but, as his eyes were fixed on his companion's face, it would seem as though his remark had more reference to that than to view or garden.

Then again, for the space of some seconds, Reine seemed to have lost herself in memory, for her eyes wore the far-off look which Jack had already observed, and a wistful expression crossed the face he thought so infinitely charming. He did not venture to break in upon her reflections. She came back from dream-land presently, and, turning, smiled at him.

"I was a long way off," she said, as though answering his thoughts. "I have a trick of taking flights from the present. It is not at all well-mannered of me."

He would have protested, but she stopped him.

"So," she remarked, "Mr. Temple is your cousin? He



is very good-looking. As a rule, I have a strong leaning to good looks."

Jack, in his honest heart, felt something almost akin to a twinge of jealousy. But he said, cordially,—

"Oh, yes, he is a handsome chap: women generally like him."

"I have an idea," pursued Reine, in a reflective tone, "that he does not like me."

"Not like you!" echoed Jack, in the sort of tone which he might have used had some one brought forward the proposition that the world was square.

"No," said Reine. "But that," she went on, "is not so much on account of anything I have done or left undone as because the lady to whom he was devoted when we met in Rome detested me, and probably gave him a bad impression of me."

"Why did she detest you?" cried Jack. "Was she jealous of you?"

"There was nothing to be jealous of," returned Reine, serenely. "She did not even know me."

"Then how could she have spoken against you to him?"

"Don't you know," said Reine, lightly, "that the people who take our characters away are always those who do not know us? The lady had, I believe, made some little overture to being acquainted with me, but, to tell you the truth," and again Reine looked out seaward, and that melancholy expression deepened in her face, "I do not care to make new acquaintances. I like to have a few friends,—real friends, in whom I believe, who believe in me; and beyond that," with a little gesture of her hand, "social intercourse is well enough just to pass the time, but it is void, hollow,—a sham."

Would she ever let him be her friend? Jack wondered, eagerly; yet he did not dare put his thoughts into words. She had relapsed into silence, and presently he ventured to say something which had been on his mind all day.

"Do you know, Mrs. Chandos," he began, with diffidence, "I hope you won't mind my saying so, but I want awfully to read your books."

Reine put her finger to her lips. "Hush!" she replied: "that is a forbidden subject. I do not pose as a poetess, and I detest any one to speak to me about my books."



Seeing how discomfited he looked, she continued, in a lighter vein,—

“Besides, I am quite sure poetry is not in your line.”

Jack was far too truthful to deny this impeachment, but he answered, with fervor,—

“I should like *anything* that you wrote.”

She gave him a glance which was almost malicious.

“Do you like what is immoral and atheistic?” she inquired.

Jack’s face was a study. Wonder, doubt, misery, indignation, all played their part in it.

“That is what the critics, or at least some of them, call my verses. They are indelicate: they give evidence of being written by a person to whom faith and modesty are but meaningless words, and the only thing they have to recommend them is a certain swing and rhythm probably caught from careful and protracted study of Swinburne.”

Reine kept her eyes on Jack’s face, but it was turned from her: she saw the red color rise in it and his hand involuntarily clinch round his stick. Her own face had flushed: she chose to repeat the hard things that had been written of her; but though she affected to despise criticism, this one sentence had always been as a dart thrust through her breast. For she was a modest, delicate, refined woman, and the lines she had written, if they breathed of passion, as indeed they did, were absolutely free from any taint of coarseness. Coarseness is often enough in the mind of the reader, even as “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Jack was so full of pain and misery that he wanted a victim.

“Tell me,” he cried, turning to her with flashing eyes, “who said that, and I will kick him, no matter who he is!”

Reine laughed: the vehemence of his championship did her good.

“And suppose,” she said, archly, “it was a woman.”

Jack’s face fell: the suggestion was like a douche of cold water on his ardor.

“Was it?” he asked, ruefully.

“I do not know. Never mind. Let us change the subject. Shall we go and listen to the music?”

She rose as she spoke. Jack was not so blithe now;

the scene was not the same to him that it had been ten minutes ago. Reine, seeing the change in him, felt sorry for what she had said, and exerted herself to talk freely and to remove the painful impression from his mind. And she succeeded soon enough.

Jack remarked without displeasure that his companion excited a good deal of observation of a respectful kind. Her dress and demeanor were those of a well-bred woman, a woman of taste; her voice was low, her manner full of repose. But she was remarkably elegant, and her slight figure was graceful in the extreme. Reine was dressed entirely in black, with a sheen and glint of jet over rich silk: the only color about her was a tiny bright-hued bird in her bonnet. She carried in her hand a large black parasol bordered with flounces of fine lace and embroidered cunningly with a little bird which exactly matched the one in her bonnet.

They entered the concert-room and seated themselves. A moment later the orchestra commenced the dreamy prelude of one of the favorite vales of the day. The first lingering notes were followed by a joyous burst of soul-stirring melody that made the blood tingle in Jack's veins and filled his heart with a great desire to put his arm round Reine and glide away with her to that enchanting region where real lovers of dancing with sympathetic partners find themselves once and again. He turned eagerly to whisper his wish to her, but her eyes were closed, and presently, as he gazed at her delicate face, a tear forced itself from under her broad eyelids.

A choking sensation rose in Jack's throat; a feeling of sympathy, of strong desire to console her, mingled with the passion stirred by the music. Never had so intense a sentiment moved him since the days when he fancied himself madly in love. He knew by instinct that this feeling was infinitely more exalted, more worthy, than that. Then a tormenting curiosity overwhelmed him to know Reine's story. Had she a husband? Great heaven! he thought, if she had, he would never get over the knowledge. But what on earth had her cousin meant by that evasive answer to his question?

Once more the music swelled into a joyful pæan, then languished and died away in a wail of violins. Then he

turned again to his companion, who was in the act of removing her handkerchief from her eyes. They wore a lovely humid look, a look full of sadness, but, as they met his, she forced a smile.

"Will you think me capricious," she whispered, "if I wish to go out again? Sometimes music is more than I can bear. That was lovely, but—but——"

"I know, I know," said Jack, in a tone of whose tenderness he was not aware. "Music does put strange thoughts into one's head sometimes."

She looked at him with more interest than she had yet felt. She had not given him credit for being sympathetic or having a soul for music.

"I think all nice people care for music," she said, and her words set his heart beating with pleasure.

At the door they came upon the rest of their party.

"My dear Reine, we meet at last!" exclaimed her aunt. "This is a terrible place for losing people: we really ought not to have left you in the jeweller's, but we strolled a little farther on, and I suppose that is how we missed you."

"All's well that ends well," returned Reine, gayly. "And now we must be careful not to divide again."

Jack's heart sank at these words: he wanted to have her to himself: this last hour had been so heavenly. And to-morrow she was to return to Cannes, and he would still be at Nice, and, oh! how dull and altered the place would seem!

Alwyne Temple was devoting himself to Dulcie, to whom it was evident he was greatly attracted. Jack saw this, and, always ready to be good-natured, suggested that his cousin should return to Nice with them to dine and sleep.

Alwyne assented readily. He would be charmed. He had only come over here for a couple of days: in reality he was staying with his sister at Cannes, but had found it rather slow there.

A sudden thrill of joy shot through Jack's breast. If his cousin Belle Pierpoint was at Cannes, he would have an excellent pretext for going over there. He and Belle had always been the best of friends.

The day at Monte Carlo had been a thorough success.



Mrs. Vernon pronounced, as the train bore them back to Nice.

"And," said Jack diffidently to Reine, "have you—at least I hope you have not been bored?"

"I have spent a very pleasant day," she answered, looking kindly at him.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER dinner, Sir John and his cousin strolled out together for a smoke and a chat. Alwyne was very full of Dulcie, the nicest, prettiest, most charming girl he had met for ages.

"Tremendous luck for you, Jack, travelling with her, stopping in the same hotel with her, and having such opportunities," he said.

"She is very nice indeed," Jack assented, without warmth, wondering how any man could have eyes for Dulcie when Reine was present. But he thanked heaven that such a case was possible and had even happened.

He was burning to know something of Mrs. Chandos, but was deterred from asking questions of Alwyne first by shyness and secondly by an intuition that his cousin was prejudiced against her. He felt that he would want to kill any man who breathed a word in her disfavor. People sometimes fall in love insensibly, but Jack's eyes were wide open, and he could not pretend to give any other word to the feeling which Reine had that day inspired in him than love. Alwyne himself opened the subject.

"I must say there is not much resemblance between the cousins," he remarked. "I never saw two women more unlike in every way than Miss Vernon and Mrs. Chandos."

"You knew Mrs. Chandos in Rome?" said Jack, interrogatively.

"Very slightly. I heard a good deal about her, but it doesn't amuse me to run after ladies who give themselves airs."



Jack flushed, but the night concealed it from his cousin. He tried to speak indifferently.

"I have seen no sign of Mrs. Chandos giving herself airs."

"She may not to you," returned Alwyne; "indeed, I remarked she was uncommonly civil to you; but she is as capricious as a cat. I expect she had her head rather turned in Rome, so that very few people were good enough for her. She pretends not to care for society, puts on cynical airs, doesn't, I'm told, believe in anything, and writes improper poetry: so she has got a reputation for being original, and a few fools run after her."

"What do you mean by improper poetry?" asked Jack, in a smothered voice, repressing a desire to take his cousin by the throat.

"Oh," said Alwyne, lightly, "it does not shock me, but I must say some of the verses are rather warm. The best part of it is that she is as cold as ice herself, and, I believe, hates men. She had rather a bad time with her husband."

Her husband! Jack's heart gave a bound. At last he was to know.

"Has she a husband?" he asked.

"No: she got rid of him."

"Do you mean that she is divorced?"

"I do mean that. He was rather a scamp,—drank, I believe, and committed other atrocities; so after about a year she had enough of him and got a divorce. He had lots of money, but she would not have a halfpenny of it, and took her own name again. I daresay she led him rather a life: she looks as if she could. I expect authoresses are not very pleasant people to live with: I shouldn't care for one, I know. Now, look at that pretty Miss Vernon. I'll be bound she couldn't write a line of poetry to save her life; but I am sure she'd make a deuced nice little wife."

Jack had heard enough—too much—by this time. He felt an odd sensation in his throat; an angry pain gnawed at his chest. With strange abruptness, he started off into an entirely new topic. Alwyne observed nothing. The darkness had hidden the changing expression of Jack's features from him, and he had been too much absorbed in

himself all day to remark how much attracted his cousin was by Mrs. Chandos. Even now, his ideas being fixed on one subject, he did not notice Jack's irrelevant remark.

"People say that it is Henry Bertram who has done Mrs. Chandos all the mischief," he continued; and Jack, like the moth that has made an effort to get away from the light but is again drawn towards it, was forced to ask who Henry Bertram was.

"You must have met him," answered Alwyne. "He goes everywhere, is a very good fellow, and extremely popular; but he believes in nothing, and has done his best to pervert Mrs. Chandos. At all events, she is devoted to him, and he to her. When he is of the party, she seldom takes notice of any one else."

"Is she going to marry him?" asked poor Jack, with a dreadful sinking at his heart.

"Good Lord, no! Bertram wouldn't marry to save his soul, though, by the way,"—laughing,—“as he does not believe in souls or their being saved, that's not very appropriate. Oh, no: there's nothing of that sort. They are purely platonic; and he is old enough to be her father. They are both clever, I suppose, and fancy themselves and each other, and think it fine not to believe in God."

Jack felt that he could not bear any more of this. He knew that Alwyne's speech was generally colored by exaggeration and a certain amount of malice, if he did not like the person of whom he spoke. But every word he said about Mrs. Chandos hurt his auditor more and more, and Jack suggested a return to the hotel.

They found Mrs. Chester and Dulcie in the sitting-room. Lilah had gone to bed. The two other ladies had retired for a confidential chat. Sir John talked to his mother, and Alwyne devoted himself to Dulcie. Presently he suggested showing her some photographs, and went to his room in quest of them. On his return, he laid them on the table, and, approaching his cousin, put a small book into his hand.

"There, Jack," he said, with a meaning smile, "is something that will interest you."

Jack glanced at the title-page, and read, "Verses from the South;" then, with an instinctive desire to conceal the book from his mother, he thrust it into his pocket.

Mrs. Chester remarked the action, but said nothing. She was far from being a woman of the world, yet she was discreet in the way of not asking questions.

Jack had only one idea now,—to get away by himself and read this precious volume, to assure himself that Mrs. Chandos had been foully maligned. His mother saw that he was *distract*, and half fancied him to be ruffled by Alwyne's taking possession of Dulcie. It was too bad of Alwyne, she thought, but he was always selfish and insisted on drawing the attention of every woman to himself. He was such a butterfly, there was no fear of his standing seriously in his cousin's way; but he ought to have seen how matters stood, the excellent lady reflected, and not have interfered with dear Johnnie.

For she really contemplated the possibility of having Dulcie for a daughter-in-law, and the idea commended itself to her. Dulcie was so amiable, so pretty, and so ladylike; all her ideas seemed so thoroughly proper, modest, and correct. It was not yet ten o'clock, so Jack could scarcely make a pretext of going to bed; but he was presently inspired by the idea that he wanted to look at one of the papers in the reading-room, and started off as though he only intended to be absent for a few minutes. But, once outside the door, he rushed to his room, lighted his candles, flung himself into a chair, and, trembling with eagerness and other emotions which he did not pause to analyze, devoured the pages.

That night was one which he would never forget if he lived to be a hundred. Until then it seemed to him as if he had never felt, never suffered. A thousand ideas and instincts were developed in him which had lain dormant before; his mind, generally so calm and unruffled, was torn by strange speculations; his even pulses throbbed with fever; love, jealousy, doubt, disappointment, fear, revolt, all struggled and fought and tore his heart with relentless fingers.

He thought the verses beautiful; there was a rhythm, a cadence in them that struck softly on his senses; and yet, as he read, he wished,—*how* he wished!—that *she* had not written them. The current of passion underlying them smote him with jealous pangs: if she could write thus of love, it was because she had known and felt it. Who was



the man, he wondered, bitterly, who had wrung these passionate verses from her? He would have given his life, he thought, if she had penned them to him, for him alone, to be seen by no other eyes than his. But that she should have written them for some other man, and then have given them to the vulgar world to read and make mock of, to turn their delicacy into grossness, to utter coarse innuendoes about them, seemed incomprehensible to him, —jarred unspeakably on his finer perceptions. There was another thing which hurt him almost as much. He was not religious, he was far from being a goody-goody young man, but he had been brought up among religious influences, and it had never once entered his honest heart to doubt God, or heaven, or hell, or any other of the faiths of Christianity.

Through all the verses there breathed a spirit of intense melancholy, of utter hopelessness. Men were puppets of some cruel force, struggling, suffering without aim, without guidance, grasping after happiness which ever eluded them, mocked at by fate, and trodden back into earth with the dust and leaves of by-gone years.

There was no indication of any trust in Divine love or goodness; and this proof that the woman he loved believed, as Alwyne had said, in nothing, hurt Jack cruelly. He thought with smothered hatred of the man who had taken the most precious of all gifts a woman can have, faith, from her; he clinched his fist involuntarily, as though her evil genius were within reach of a blow.

It was two o'clock in the morning, and still Jack sat there with his soul distraught and full of misery. He loved this woman, and he did not want to love her; personally she was all that was sweet, fair, and gracious in his eyes, but his heart and mind could not approve of her. Yet he was madly anxious to hear what she herself had to say about these things: he did not want to judge her even by what she had written. But it was scarcely likely she would deign to give any explanation to him, whom she only seemed to regard with the patronizing kindness of a woman of the world for an overgrown boy.

He went to bed, slept for a few hours, and woke early. The thoughts of the night before came back painfully to him, and he rose and went for a walk. It was a lovely



morning, but he felt for once incapable of enjoying the air and exercise that were usually so stimulating to his vigorous health. Of course he had but one idea,—a mad longing to see Mrs. Chandos again, to look at her by the light of this new and painful revelation, and to know whether he would care less for her now.

He breakfasted with his mother and Alwyne in their sitting-room.

"Halloo, Jack!" cried his cousin, as they met: "what the deuce became of you last night? I hunted about for you all over the place."

"I went to bed," replied Jack.

"I say, old chap, you were not annoyed at my talking to Miss Dulcie, were you? I wouldn't trespass for the world on your property, you know."

Jack saw that his mother was regarding him with some eagerness, as if she too suspected that he had been annoyed by Alwyne's monopolizing the young lady.

"Not in the very least!" he replied, in a tone whose heartiness was calculated to remove doubt from both minds. "She is a very nice, pretty girl, and you shall both have my blessing if it is of any use to you."

Mrs. Chester felt a twinge of disappointment.

"I hope, my dear Alwyne," she said, a little stiffly, "that you will not make your attentions to Miss Vernon too marked. You know her mother and I were at school together."

Alwyne laughed gayly.

"My dearest aunt," he replied, "I assure you the daughter of your school-friend shall be respected. But now," coaxingly,—and his manners were extremely seductive when he wished them to be so,—"why should we not make up a party and go for a delightful drive? We can have two carriages, and Jack and I will go with Mrs. Chandos and her cousin, and you and Mrs. Vernon and Lilah in the other."

Alwyne seldom troubled his head to consider Lilah's feelings, and she detested him cordially in consequence and never lost an opportunity of being spiteful to him.

But Jack did not forget her, although Alwyne's proposal seemed delightful to him.

"Poor little Lilah!" he said: "we must think of her."

She had a bad time yesterday, and will, I dare say, want a voice in arranging matters to-day."

Alwyne's look intimated plainly, "Confound Lilah!" but he could not give verbal utterance to the sentiment. He had been a spoiled child all his life, and abhorred contradiction.

Jack, seeing and interpreting his look, said, good-humor edly,—

"Never mind, old chap; we will see that you are paired off with Miss Dulcie. Have you any idea, mother, what the other ladies are going to do to-day?"

"I rather fancy," Mrs. Chester replied, "that Mrs. Chandos returns to Cannes this afternoon." And, as a swift change, a look of blank disappointment, crossed her son's face, a sudden and unpleasing idea took possession of her mind.

She hoped from the bottom of her heart that her dear son was not going to allow himself to be drawn away by the fascinations of this dangerous woman. For Alwyne, after Dulcie left them the previous evening, had given his aunt a little biographical sketch of Reine, even more highly colored and less favorable than the one which he had presented to Jack.

Mrs. Chester was, like many excellent women, narrow-minded. She was extremely religious, and thought of doubters and sceptics as miserable castaways directly under the Divine ban. A male unbeliever was a shocking spectacle, but there were no words adequate to describe her horror of a woman without religion. In her eyes, too, a divorced woman was a social pariah: if a woman was unfortunate enough to have a bad husband, she must suffer her sad fate in silence and with resignation, seeking comfort in prayer and good works. Mrs. Chester was kind-hearted, very reticent of giving an unfavorable judgment upon any one, but her convictions were remarkably strong. She had only seen Mrs. Chandos for a few minutes, and had admired her genuinely and been struck by the charm of her manner; but after Alwyne's revelation she had felt strongly that the less she and her family were brought in contact with Reine, the better. She was almost disposed to blame Mrs. Vernon for having introduced her to them.

When she saw the look of pain and disappointment on her son's face at the announcement of Mrs. Chandos's departure, it gave her a shock as though the knowledge of a misfortune had come suddenly upon her. The next moment she felt distinctly glad that temptation was to be removed from her dear son. Mrs. Chandos would leave Nice. John would forget her and resume his attentions to Dulcie. Alwyne, she hoped, would also go back either to Cannes or Monte Carlo, and their pleasant little party would be restored to its original composition. Sir John had at present given no intimation of any intention to return to England, though, when they started, it was supposed that as soon as he had seen them comfortably settled at Nice he was to return to his hunting, hitherto the first object of his life.

The door opened, and a waiter brought in a note from Mrs. Vernon. She wrote that her party would take advantage of the lovely weather to sit out on the Promenade: would Mrs. Chester and Lilah join them there? If not, she hoped they would all meet at lunch, when they might make some arrangements for the afternoon.

"It will do Lilah good to go out in her chair," said Sir John, rising with alacrity. "I will go and ask her what she thinks about it." He returned to say that Lilah was most anxious to be out, and Mrs. Chester wrote a line to Mrs. Vernon proposing that they should all meet on the Promenade in an hour's time.

Lilah had made her brother promise to devote himself to her this morning,—to sit and walk by her chair; and, however irksome Jack found this promise to make and keep, he had not the heart to refuse or evade it.

"Come on," said Alwyne to him; "I see them out there;" but his cousin, repressing the eagerness he felt, merely answered,—

"All right: you join them. I must wait for Lilah."

So Alwyne went, and Jack paced the room in an agony of impatience until Lilah made her appearance. When she was settled in her chair they started for the Promenade, and presently came upon the rest of the party seated on a bench, Alwyne evidently bent on making himself agreeable to Dulcie, whilst her mother and Reine were deep in conversation. As the chair drew up in front



of them, they all rose and greeted Lilah, who received their attentions with great affability. She liked to be the centre of attraction, and her wan little face lit up with smiles. Reine spoke very sweetly and kindly to her,—told her they had missed her at Monte Carlo the day before, described the place to her, and said that her brother must certainly take her to spend a day there. She proposed to walk on a little way with Lilah in her chair, and the invalid was delighted. So they moved forward, Jack on one side, Reine on the other,—he usually silent, but drinking in every tone of the gracious voice which, as he thought, dropped pearls and diamonds; feeling every moment that his doubts about her were vanishing like a morning mist before the sunshine, and that she was the sweetest, most lovable woman upon God's earth. It filled him with joy to see how Lilah took to her, Lilah who was so prone to show jealous dislike of any one whom he seemed to admire. But her sharp eyes had not yet discovered his attraction to Reine, her fixed idea for the moment being that Dulcie was the object of his attentions and thoughts.

Lilah talked quite confidentially to Reine; spoke of her own sufferings and privations, with tears in her eyes; of the hardship of being different from other people and unable to enjoy life as they enjoyed it. And Reine replied in her sympathetic voice that it was indeed hard, most hard, but that some day, perhaps, Lilah would outgrow her ailments; and she called to mind a wonderful cure that had been effected by some German baths in a similar case.

Lilah's eyes brightened.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "if I could only be well, I should be so happy!"

"But," said Reine, "do you find that every one is happy just because they are free from aches and pains?"

"If they are not, they ought to be," returned Lilah, peremptorily. "I don't pity any one who is strong, and sleeps well, and never has a headache."

"What about heart-aches?" said Reine, with a sad little smile.

"Oh, those are easily got over," returned Lilah, with the flippancy of a person speaking of a disorder which he has never experienced.



"At all events, this lovely day ought to cure every ache," said Reine, brightly. "It seems impossible to realize that we are so near Christmas."

Jack, though comparatively happy at being in the company of Mrs. Chandos, had the natural longing of a man who loves a woman to be alone with her; but Fate only granted him this opportunity for a very few minutes. His mind was full of questions that he desired to ask her, and he was keenly anxious to know when and where he was likely to see her again.

"I am so awfully sorry that you are going away," he said to her, taking advantage of the very first moment when they were out of ear-shot of the rest of the party.

"Thank you: you are very kind," replied Reine, lightly.

Her tone hurt him: it was as though she declined to take seriously the words that were so seriously meant.

"I wanted so much," Jack went on, humbly, "to have talked to you,—to have asked you about—about a lot of things—about your book which I read last night."

"Oh," said Reine, in a voice that held a slight accent of mockery, "have you really been reading some of my verses? I hope they have not shocked you."

"I think they are beautiful," he said, and then stopped short.

"But!" she said, raising her eyes to him and smiling. "I distinctly detect a but in your voice."

Jack hesitated. The color deepened in his face. He ardently desired to speak, but some emotion chained his tongue. His very silence confirmed her suggestion.

"You *are* shocked. You do not approve of them," said Reine, a faint pink illumining her own cheek. "I am a thought-reader. You cannot deceive me."

There was a touch of disdain in her tone and heart, a slight feeling of resentment that this young fellow whom she had passively tolerated as an admirer should presume to constitute himself a judge.

"Why do you take such a bad view of life?" burst out Jack, impetuously. "Why do you write as if there were no good in anything?—as if the world was a miserable place, and there was nothing to look to in the future?"

"Perhaps I write according to my experience and convictions," she returned, with some coldness.

"No," cried Jack, "that cannot be. I will not believe it is natural to you. Some one else has given you morbid thoughts. Why should you have such ideas,—you who are beautiful, and whom every one loves?"

"Including your cousin?" she asked, in a mocking voice.

"I do not think his opinion matters much," replied Jack, committing a breach of tact in permitting her to see that her surmise was correct.

Unreasonable as it was, Reine was nettled by his admission. She thought a score of hard things about herself, but she did not like to have it proved that any one thought ill of her.

"After all," she said, coldly, "I do not think that either he or you can be in a position to judge of the actions, thoughts, or feelings of a person comparatively unknown to you. Every one who chooses to buy my books is, of course, at liberty to form his opinion of them, and find what fault he chooses with them; but he is *not* at liberty to discuss them with me or to take me to task for the sentiments expressed in them."

"Oh," stammered Jack, utterly abashed and miserable, "you do not think I would be such a presumptuous ass as to——"

But here they arrived at the hotel door, at which Alwyne was standing.

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## CHAPTER IX.

JACK did not go in to lunch, but wandered about miserably alone. He had offended the woman he would have given anything he possessed to please, and he told himself that he was one of those fools who rush in where angels fear to tread, and that he had been guilty of an unpardonable impertinence which she would probably never overlook. He might never see her again: in an hour she was going back to Cannes: probably if they ever met in future she would ignore him. Poor Jack, as he flung

himself on a bench and surveyed the scene that seemed so glorious only an hour ago, was in a mood much more suited to comprehend Mrs. Chandos's pessimistic views than he would then have thought possible. The present was melancholy and the future blank. It was a dreadful thing that, in the midst of a life which seemed full, complete, bright, one should be liable to have its whole pleasing tenor changed by the introduction of one fresh element. A man is happy and contented, thoroughly satisfied with his surroundings; he accidentally meets a woman, and forty-eight hours later she is the pivot on which his every thought and action turns; her presence and her smiles constitute Paradise, her absence and her frowns plunge him into misery. Yet every other incident of life is unchanged. Jack, in his normal condition, thought hunting the panacea for all ills; but at this moment, when he told himself that he had better get back to it, the thought, so far from stimulating his fancy, made him feel profoundly dejected, and the sport he had so ardently loved seemed a very poor exchange for looking into the eyes of Reine Chandos on the shores of the blue Mediterranean.

Gradually one overpowering idea took possession of him: he could not part with her under the ban of her displeasure; he must have one smile, one kind word, from her, or life would be intolerable. Wending his way into the town, he selected a small basket and had it filled with the choicest white flowers; elsewhere he purchased a box of bonbons, and proceeded to the railway station to await her arrival. Fortune favored him so far that Mrs. Chandos came attended only by her maid, and with no relations or friends to see her off.

Reine's heart was kind, and she was not capricious: she did not love to give pain to those who cared for her for the sake of accentuating her triumph. She saw, by the mingled humility and eagerness of Jack's manner, that he was wearing sackcloth for his offence and was dying to propitiate her. After all, poor boy, his crime had been a small one, and prompted not by impertinence, but by a too great interest in her which she regretted: so she smiled very kindly upon him, accepted his offerings, and seemed quite to have forgotten that he had displeased her.



For all that he dared not venture to ask if he might call on her at Cannes when he went over to see his cousin, so desperately afraid was he lest she should refuse consent or show him that a visit would be unwelcome. But as he went back to the hotel with a lightened heart he upbraided himself for his cowardice, and resolved that go he would, whatever the result might be.

He was not sorry to find that the rest of the party were out driving. His mother left word for him the direction which they had taken, but he had no mind to join them, and preferred to saunter about with his own thoughts for company.

At dinner he devoted his conversation entirely to Mrs. Vernon. That astute lady perfectly understood the object of his attentions, and willingly led the conversation to Reine, of whom she spoke in eulogistic and affectionate terms. She was so clever, so much admired; it was unfortunate that her domestic experiences should have embittered her life and thoughts, but no shadow of blame attached to her. Mrs. Vernon did not enter into particulars about Reine's married life, and Jack was far too well mannered to betray any curiosity upon the subject, though it was the one which of all others most interested him.

Mrs. Vernon saw with pleasure how much attracted he was to her niece: it relieved her of the embarrassment which she feared in case his fancy had lighted upon Dulcie. Alwyne was paying her much more attention than Sir John had ever done, and Dulcie accepted it without any symptom of awkwardness or displeasure; but this caused little trouble to Mrs. Vernon, as, in case of Mr. Temple courting his dismissal by overtures of a too pointed character, it would not be likely to lead to any diminution of friendship between the Vernon and Chester families. Indeed, Mrs. Vernon saw plainly enough that Mrs. Chester inwardly resented Alwyne's interference with her son.

Under other circumstances, Dulcie's mother would have been pleased by Mr. Temple's attentions, for she was aware that he was rich and that his position was undeniable. When she reflected on the dreadful bar which lay between Dulcie and social advancement, a smothered fury took possession of her. The wretch who stood between her and fortune still lingered much in the same state, and,



now that he had survived so long, it seemed improbable that he would die. When Mrs. Vernon looked at her daughter's pretty smiling face and remembered this appalling fact, she almost hated her. It was not as if the girl had been led away by strong passion: she was incapable of feeling it: why, already it was evident that she had almost forgotten the man for whom she had idiotically ruined her life.

After dinner all the party adjourned for a time to Mrs. Chester's spacious sitting-room, which had windows overlooking the sea. Lilah was full of Mrs. Chandos, and talked of little else.

"Is she not elegant and lovely?" she asked her brother; "and does she not dress beautifully? Oh, Johnnie, I am dying to read her books. You *must* get them for me."

The first part of her remark had been delightful to Jack. He was sitting beside her with her hand in his, and he had almost involuntarily given it a little squeeze, but at her last words he as involuntarily unclasped it. A painful feeling contracted his heart. He knew that he loved, admired, respected Reine more than he had ever done any woman in his life, and yet he was distinctly conscious that he should not like Lilah to read her poetry. He was silent: it almost seemed as if he had not heard her.

"Johnnie," she said, sharply, "do you hear me? What are you thinking of?"

"Well, my dear," he said, trying to smile, and looking as he felt, very awkward, "Mrs. Chandos's poetry is very clever, but it is very sad, and I think you ought to read something more cheerful."

"I like sad books," cried Lilah, impetuously: "they appeal to me much more than the others. I am sure," bitterly, "my life is sad enough, and it does me good to think that other people are miserable too, sometimes, even though they don't seem to have any cause. And so," gazing suddenly upon him, "you have read them, have you? I thought you hated poetry?"

"I have seen one book," he said, evasively.

"Oh, Johnnie, have you got it? Do, like a dear, fetch it for me."

"It is not proper reading for a little girl like you," interposed Alwyne, who was fond of teasing her; and then

he suddenly turned very red, remembering the presence of Mrs. Vernon and Dulcie.

Lilah at once grasped at the opportunity for retaliation.

"I think it is very rude of you to say Mrs. Chandos's book is improper before her aunt and cousin," she cried, sharply.

"I only said for a little girl," returned Alwyne, recovering himself: "for every one else it is delightful."

"I am not a little girl," retorted Lilah: "I am twenty-one. Oh, Johnnie," again turning to her brother, "do—do go and fetch it for me, there's a good boy."

Sir John was on the rack, but here his mother interposed.

"You know, Lilah dear, it is not good for you to read at night. It excites you and makes your head ache. Wait until to-morrow."

"Oh, very well," returned Lilah, pettishly. "Of course I can never have anything I want. But I am quite sure," with a vindictive glance at Alwyne, "that Mrs. Chandos never wrote anything that any one might not read."

"Have you read your cousin's poetry?" Alwyne whispered to Dulcie.

"No," she answered; "I do not care for poetry, and mamma said it was very clever, but that it was not altogether suitable for girls."

"She was quite right," returned Alwyne, with some warmth. His morals were by no means of a high order, and most of his time was spent in the society of ladies who would not have been likely to take any additional hurt from what they read; but with his admiration for Dulcie had come a revulsion in Alwyne's sentiments towards women, and he was as much attracted now to what he had been used to call a bread-and-butter miss as he had before been repelled by the genus.

When, later, he and Jack were smoking their cigars together on the Promenade, he went into a rhapsody on the subject of modesty and innocence.

Jack could not help laughing.

"My dear old chap," he said, "you have changed your tune with a vengeance since we last discussed the subject."

But Alwyne insisted that he had always admired virtue

in the main, though he might have amused himself with those who could not lay much claim to the attribute.

"And if," he proceeded, "I had any idea of marrying, which I have not, I cannot imagine anything more delightful than to marry a girl like Dulcie Vernon."

"Why not marry her?" suggested Jack.

"Now, there is a girl," proceeded Alwyne, with enthusiasm, "thoroughly well brought up, as innocent as a daisy, who has not, I'll swear, a wrong thought in her dear little head, and who would be as incapable of deceiving one as—as an angel."

Jack concurred heartily in his cousin's praise of Dulcie, and again suggested that he should take this ideal young lady to wife.

"I don't want to marry," returned Alwyne; "I have always set my face against it; but, if I did, I can only say I never saw a girl I could better fancy."

"Where is Belle staying at Cannes?" inquired Jack, changing the subject with some abruptness.

"Oh," said Alwyne, turning towards him with a short laugh, "the flame and the moth, eh?"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Jack, with a touch of anger in his tone.

"I mean, my dear old chap," replied Alwyne, very decidedly, "that you want to know Belle's address with a view to going over to Cannes, and that you want to go to Cannes not to see Belle but to see Mrs. Chandos. Now, if you will take the advice of one who knows, you will leave that lady quite alone. You will only make yourself miserable and won't do any good. She don't care for men: she will be civil to you for a little time, and the moment she sees you mean business she will turn round upon you and wish you good-morning. It has happened to scores of fellows."

"I am very much obliged to you for your kind information," returned Jack, with extreme stiffness. "And now perhaps you will answer my question about Belle."

"Don't get angry, Jack," said his cousin. "I only told you the perfect truth to save you from future bother."

"I don't see what right you or any one else has to give advice on a subject which you merely take a shot at,—and a very bad shot, too."



"We shall see," returned Alwyne, dryly. "Meantime, Belle is staying at the Hôtel de la Plage until she gets into the villa she has taken."

"I shall go over and see her to-morrow," announced Jack, in a resolute tone, intended to forbid further remonstrance. "Shall I give her any message for you?"

"Yes: say I shall be over there in a day or two; though, to tell the truth, I am in no hurry to leave this place at present. That dear little girl has become necessary to my existence. There is such a delightful shy look in those sweet blue eyes of hers, I could lay my life she's never been in love. Fancy, Jack, the delight of being a girl's first love,—of making her heart really beat for the first time,—of reading her dawning feelings in her innocent tell-tale eyes."

"Alwyne," said Jack, seriously, "you have no right to talk like that, or to attempt to win the girl's love, if you do not really intend anything. Please remember that I introduced you to her, and that she and her mother belong to my mother's party."

"Don't be afraid! I shall not forget anything," returned Alwyne, lightly.

But Jack's scruples were not satisfied.

"It would be a blackguard thing," he continued, "to draw a girl on in the way you spoke of just now, and then to leave her and say you meant nothing."

"I don't see any sign of Miss Dulcie's feelings being engaged at present. And don't alarm yourself: I am not in the habit of doing 'blackguard things.'"

Here they were joined by a friend, and the conversation came to an end.

The next morning, after breakfast, Jack announced his intention of going to Cannes.

His mother looked up quickly, with a gleam of distress in her eyes; but Lilah, instead of combating the idea, as she was prone to do any suggestion which was to take him from her side, said she thought he was quite right, and that he must give her love to dear Belle, and beg her to come over and spend a day with them very soon. The fact was that Lilah would rather have done and suffered anything than that her dear brother should marry, and she had been in a terrible fright lest he should seriously



take a fancy to Dulcie. Anything, therefore, that removed him from the orbit of her society was welcome to the jealous little sister.

Jack esteemed himself most fortunate to encounter so little opposition, and it was with a joyous heart that he took the train for Cannes.

When he was ushered into Mrs. Pierpoint's sitting-room, that lady uttered a cry of mingled wonder and pleasure.

"My dear Jack," she exclaimed, "this is one of the greatest surprises of my life. What in the name of good fortune brings you here? Why, what a holiday the foxes must be having!"

She gave her cheek to his cousinly salute, and he availed himself cordially of her generosity.

"Why, Belle," he exclaimed, the content of his soul not being due alone to the sight of his favorite cousin, "how well and how pretty you look! And how stout you are getting!"

"Jack," she replied, "you are a dear boy, but you never had a grain of tact. Why remind me at your very first word of the only sorrow of my life! Stout, too!—the coarsest, most revolting expression you could have chosen. As if I was a green-groceress, or the landlady of a public house."

"My dear," cried Jack, "I meant it as a compliment, on my word of honor: it becomes you immensely."

"And it is for this," pursued Mrs. Pierpoint, tragically, "that I have taken to eating biscuits, which I hate, and have left off champagne and sweets, which I love. However, now you have stabbed me to the heart, proceed, and tell me what brings you here."

"I came to bring my mother and Lilah over. They are at Nice. We thought it might do poor little Lilah good, and the day before yesterday we met Alwyne at Monte Carlo, and he told us you were here."

"Is that horrid Mrs. Cunningham there?" asked Belle, with a tone of lively concern.

"I don't think so," said Jack. "I did not see Alwyne speak to any lady there; and he returned to Nice with us, and is there now."

"Really? Why, what is he doing at Nice?"

"Just at present," replied Jack, "he is making himself very agreeable to a young lady of our party, and has discovered that he much prefers girls to married women."

"You don't say so!" cried Belle. "Who is she? and is he really serious? I do wish he would marry some nice girl and settle down. He has an unfortunate knack of always taking up with the most objectionable women. Tell me quick, Jack, who is she?"

"Miss Vernon,—Miss Dulcie Vernon. Her mother and mine were at school together, and had not seen each other for years, till, oddly enough, they met in the railway-carriage going to Dover; and we have been together ever since."

"What is she like? Is she nice? Is she pretty? Will she do?"

"She is everything that can be desired," laughed Jack. "My only fear is that he will pay her too much attention, and not mean anything."

"Oh," cried Belle, "I must go over and inspect her. The one thing in the world that I want is to see that boy nicely married. I live in perpetual fear of some dreadful thing happening to him, and of his being obliged to marry some horrid woman or other who will pretend he has compromised her."

"I bring a special message, imploring you to come over and spend the day with us. When shall it be? To-morrow?"

"Yes: to-morrow will suit me beautifully."

Jack was delighted at the turn things had taken. His visit seemed the most natural thing in the world.

"But, Jack," exclaimed his cousin, with a searching glance, "if she is so very desirable, and you have been travelling with her, and are still stopping on and leaving your beloved fox, how is it that your young affections have not become entangled?"

"Oh," answered Jack, lightly, "you know, Belle, that I am not at all inflammable."

Belle looked at him shrewdly.

"When you are kindled, I expect you will get very much burned indeed. That is always the way with you unflammable people."

Deep down in his heart, Jack suspected that his cousin's

words were true, but he put on an air of unconcern, and said,—

“I am safe enough, my dear.”

“At present,” she answered, laughing.

Then, little knowing how oracular were her words,—

“But who can tell what a day may bring forth? A heart is lost all in a moment, just like one’s dressing-case on a journey. But to go back to Alwyne. Vernon—Vernon—what Vernon?”

“There is a relation of theirs staying here,” said Jack, so desperately afraid of his face betraying him that he walked to the window and pretended to be looking at some object outside,—“a cousin,—a Mrs. Chandos.”

“Mrs. Chandos!” cried Belle: “you don’t say so! How very curious!”

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## CHAPTER X.

MRS. PIERPOINT asked Jack a dozen questions about Mrs. Chandos, and before he had answered half of them his secret was in her possession. But she was too clever to let him be aware of her discovery, and good-naturedly talked away on the subject which interested him so vitally in the most natural way in the world. She did not even wait for his interrogatories, but proceeded to tell him all that he most wanted to know, and to delight him and increase his affection by singing the praises of the lady of his love.

“She is perfectly charming,” Mrs. Pierpoint declared; “so clever, so graceful, so original; every one wants to know her. But she is very retiring, and so people are ill-natured and declare that she is proud and conceited; but I am sure she is nothing of the sort. My belief is that she is morbid on the subject of her position as a divorced woman; but every one knows that not a shadow of blame attaches to her.”

“Is her husband alive?” Jack ventured to ask.

“He is drinking himself to death as fast as he can,” answered Mrs. Pierpoint. “I do not quite know the real story, but I believe that he drank before his marriage



(and that her father knew it), but, as he was desperately in love with her, he gave it up for a time and broke out again very soon after their marriage. She was horrified, and did not attempt to conceal her disgust for him; then he struck her, and she left him. After that, he behaved in a manner which made it a very simple matter for her to get a divorce."

Jack was not in the least aware that his hands were clinched like a vice round his stick, and that his eyes were fixed with startling intensity on his cousin's face; and Mrs. Pierpoint was kind enough not to seem to notice the strangeness of his behavior. She turned carelessly to her work-basket and took out a piece of knitting.

"What wretches some men are!" she said, with a light laugh: "it is no wonder she hates all the species."

"No wonder, indeed," echoed Jack, with a long-drawn sigh. "But does she?" eagerly.

"So I am told. The feeling is not reciprocal: men admire her immensely."

"I don't see how they can help it," said Jack, innocently. "Does she live alone?"

"No; she is never quite alone. She hates solitude, and she has two or three devoted friends between whom she divides her time. She is well off since her father's death, and a woman who has money need never be friendless. Just now she is staying with Mrs. Herbert; they have taken a villa together. Mrs. Herbert is a clever, agreeable woman, dreadfully delicate, and they bemoan life together in great luxury and comfort. By the way, Jack, suppose we go and call on them after lunch. What do you say?"

Jack tried not to show his eagerness, but it displayed itself in an increased show of affection for his cousin. During luncheon he was so assiduous in his attentions to her that she said, with a malicious smile,—

"My dear boy, I have a dreadful suspicion that you are either falling in love with me or are about to. Now, please don't, because I have always gone in for the strictest propriety since my marriage, and I would not give Algy a moment's uneasiness for the world."

Jack laughed gayly.

"Algy is the luckiest man in the world," he said, "and.



if I were not your cousin, heaven knows but what I might fall a victim to your charms. But up to this time I haven't passed the cousinly boundary, have I, Belle? You know cousins are allowed great latitude."

"I thought it best to remind you in time," she replied, demurely.

Jack was in a seventh heaven at the thought of the coming visit. What did he hope or expect from it? He could not have told; it was a feeling of intense joy such as comes to a child who hears suddenly in the midst of its lesson that it is to have a holiday. Only one anxiety troubled him,—the fear lest Mrs. Chandos should not be at home. When, on reaching the villa, that fear was dispelled, and they were being ushered through the palm-lined hall to the salon, his heart beat high, his blue eyes danced with pleasure. And in another second the illusion was gone. The servant opened the door so noiselessly that the occupants of the room were not aware of the presence of visitors until their names were announced.

There were two persons sitting on a large couch with their backs to the door, evidently engrossed in an absorbing discussion. They were bending towards each other with eager and interested looks. One was Mrs. Chandos, the other a man, and a pang of jealousy shot through Jack's heart, and the blue vault of his seventh heaven was hidden by inky clouds. Before Mrs. Chandos greeted him, before she had time to present her companion to the new-comers, Jack knew instinctively who this man was. And when Mrs. Chandos murmured, "Mrs. Pierpoint, Sir John Chester, Mr. Bertram," he was quite prepared for the name. As was natural, the opposite sexes paired: Sir John seated himself near Mrs. Chandos, but not on the couch which Bertram had vacated; and Mrs. Pierpoint took possession of Mr. Bertram.

The pleasure which Jack had so keenly anticipated was lost in disappointment; a cruel feeling of being *de trop*, of having interrupted a pleasant *tête-à-tête*, overwhelmed him. Although Mrs. Chandos's manner was courteous and even kind, poor Jack was weighed upon by the sense that he was not wanted. A miserable shyness crept over him: every particle of the blithe boldness which he had felt five minutes ago deserted him: he was merely an in-

truder. Instead of pouring out his pleasure at seeing her, of begging her to come over to Nice again as he had intended, of proposing another party to Monte Carlo, he was oppressed by the feeling that he was nothing to her, that he in no wise interested her, that she could not care two straws for his company under any circumstances, and that he was only a stupid, fox-hunting young squire who could not hope to inspire any interest in this charming, clever woman of the world.

He stole a glance at Bertram, who was chatting gayly away to Mrs. Pierpoint, evidently amusing her by his conversation. He was a man of middle age, with a face not handsome but of a pleasing expression: his manner was perfect, his voice particularly agreeable. Certainly he did not fulfil the conventional idea that Jack had formed of him as an atheist and the evil genius of Mrs. Chandos's life.

As he sat almost tongue-tied, how bitterly he envied the man's genial ease of manner! with what mortification he secretly contrasted it with his own awkwardness! Jack was not himself to-day, for indeed he was wont to have plenty of cheery talk for women as well as for his own sex.

Mrs. Chandos did most of the talking, and Jack answered as best he might, weighted with the dreadful sense that she did not want him, that he was boring her, and that she was dying to get back to the engrossing discussion which he had interrupted.

Instead of the delight he had anticipated, he was experiencing purgatory. He wished that his cousin would give the signal for departure: he felt even more anxious to get away than he had been to come. But Belle showed no intention of moving: she was amused by her conversation with Mr. Bertram, and she thought she was doing Jack the greatest kindness in giving him the opportunity of a long chat with the lady of his love.

With all her tact, Mrs. Chandos could not help at last showing a little weariness at the prolonged visit, and poor Jack, whose perceptions were terribly acute this afternoon, was miserable in the consciousness that she was bored. At last he said desperately to Belle that he was afraid of missing his train back to Nice, although the ex-

cuse was of the baldest. But she took the hint, having become suddenly aware that the conversation of the other pair was somewhat strained and lagging.

When they regained the carriage, Jack's face was so crestfallen and his manner so changed that, in the kindness of her heart, Belle forbore to make any comment, and rattled on with the first thing which came into her head. It was praise of Mr. Bertram.

"He is perfectly charming," she said. "I have heard so much of him, and always wanted to meet him. He is more interesting than a dozen young men; and I feel quite capable of falling in love with him myself."

Belle had no idea of the dagger she was planting in Jack's heart, or that he was already bitterly jealous of Henry Bertram.

As Jack went back to Nice, his thoughts were of the gloomiest. He wished he had never seen Mrs. Chandos. He felt as though he would never be happy again. There was only one thing for him to do,—to get back to his hunting and his home interests. But, somehow, they had lost their savor now, and he felt a desperate clinging to this spot, which a few days ago he had vowed he could not stand more than a fortnight of at the outside.

Meanwhile, Alwyne had been spending a very much more agreeable day. He had sat and walked with Dulcie and her mother on the Promenade in the morning, and he had driven with Dulcie and Lilah in the afternoon. It was very evident, from the glowing expression of his fine hazel eyes, that his sentiments towards the fair girl opposite him were hourly intensifying, and Lilah was delighted to perceive it. Dulcie's manner was shy and a little embarrassed, but Alwyne was very far from guessing the real cause of this, and put it down to sweet modesty and dawning love. In reality, Dulcie's thoughts were chiefly concerned with Noel,—with wondering if it were an absolute fact that he was nothing to her and could in no way control her future life and actions,—and partly with a sense of shame that her affection for him, which she had rated so highly, had not only dwindled away to nothing, but threatened to change into positive aversion, whilst it was useless to conceal from herself that Alwyne's society and attentions were extremely agreeable to her.



Morton was in the highest spirits. She enjoyed the new life immensely: the visitors' servants at the hotel formed quite a gay and brilliant society, and she had become bosom friends with Mrs. Chester's maid, who gave her the minutest particulars of all that concerned her family. Morton had at first made up her mind to a match between her young lady and Sir John, but, seeing this did not appear to progress as she had anticipated, she next turned her thoughts to his cousin. True, he had no title, but the maid told her that he was a good deal richer than Sir John, and had a finer country place.

"Why, Miss Dulcie," said Morton, on her young lady's return from driving, "you are looking quite yourself again, I declare. I expect"—significantly—"you have been enjoying your drive."

"Yes, I have, immensely," answered Dulcie, with a slight blush. And then she sat down and looked pensively out of the window.

"What a good-looking young gentleman Mr. Temple is!" remarked Morton, tentatively. "Much handsomer than Sir John."

"Yes," acquiesced Dulcie.

"Now, why shouldn't you be Mrs. Temple?" exclaimed Morton. "Anybody can see it only remains with you, Miss Dulcie. He has lots of money and a fine place; and I'm sure the best thing you can do, to save more trouble, is just to get married right off."

Dulcie turned uneasily in her chair.

"Morton," she asked, "are you *sure* mamma said that—that affair at the registry office was illegal?"

"Quite sure," answered Morton, stoutly. "She said it as plain as possible, and about your being a ward in chancery, and all of us being liable to be prosecuted. Oh, that's right enough!"

"I wish I was quite sure," uttered Dulcie.

"Why, Miss Dulcie, what's to make you doubt it? You know your mamma isn't the lady to say a thing if it wasn't true. And she says to me at the time, '*The marriage is illegal; and think, Morton,*' she says, '*what dreadful trouble you might have brought my daughter into.*' You take my advice: if Mr. Temple proposes to you,—and any one can see with half an eye that you've only to look kind at him



and he will,—you jump at it, and forget all that's past and gone."

"But suppose,"—and Dulcie trembled and her eyes dilated,—"suppose he ever heard anything about the other?"

"Who's to tell him?" cried Morton. "I expect Mr. Trevor, if he ever does recover, will be glad enough to hold his tongue. He won't want to stand up and be shot at; and that's what Mr. Temple 'ud do in precious quick time, you may depend, if he came troubling."

Dulcie made up her weak mind to accept Alwyne's attentions. Half an hour later she was alone in the sitting-room, when he came in with a message from Mrs. Chester. After he had delivered it, he stayed on a few minutes, and they stood together looking out of the window. Suddenly Alwyne took Dulcie's hand, and, seeing how she trembled, though she made no effort to release it, he, fascinated by her beauty and this evidence of maiden modesty, bent towards her and touched her lips with his. A sudden flame covered her from throat to brow, and she drew herself away from him. For, as a matter of fact, this was the first time that a man's lips had kissed hers, her courtship with Noel having taken place entirely in the open air and in public.

Before Alwyne could follow up his advance, as the fire in his eyes betrayed his intention of doing, the door opened, and Mrs. Vernon appeared. In an instant she grasped the situation, and horror filled her breast. Here was an awful dilemma. Her daughter married to one man and receiving—in ignorance, it is true—the advances of another!

But she gave not the faintest sign of observing the confusion of the pair, and listened with an excellent grace to the message which Alwyne promptly bethought himself of delivering. She took care that he should have no opportunity of speaking alone with Dulcie again that evening, and Alwyne, who was burning to make love to this pretty creature with whom he was falling very much in love, was furious at being baffled in his intentions.

When Mrs. Vernon retired that night she was a prey to the most painful and harassing thoughts. She was exasperated with Dulcie. Was the girl devoid of all heart, of all sense of decency, that, after having gone through

so much for the sake of one man, she should be ready before a month had elapsed to fall into the arms of another?

And now what was to be done? Should she tell Dulcie that her marriage was indeed no sham, but a miserable reality? No, she was afraid to do that until she knew whether Noel would recover. She had no confidence in her daughter now: she did not know what step the foolish, headstrong girl might take next. She might elect to escape to her husband and bring about the *esclandre* which was the terror of Mrs. Vernon's life. She had resolved that if the wretched man, as she called him in her thoughts, did recover, he should not claim his bride until a pretence of courtship and a religious ceremony had been gone through.

On the other hand, if mercifully he should die, it would be far better that Dulcie should continue to believe the marriage had been invalid, in which case fear of the disgrace of its being revealed would insure her keeping it a profound secret. She must by some means keep young Temple and her daughter apart; but, having discovered the girl's powers of duplicity, she was horribly afraid of being outwitted by her. To mention the subject to Dulcie might be fatal: if she forbade her to give encouragement to Alwyne she might ask leading questions to which it would be impossible to give misleading answers. And if Dulcie regained her freedom the fact was not to be lost sight of that Alwyne would be an excellent match.

It required an immense amount of manœuvring to prevent the young people from conversing privately with each other, but Mrs. Vernon devoted her entire mind to the task. Had she been playing her cards in order to catch this spoiled, self-willed young man, she could not have succeeded more perfectly than by her present action. He chafed fiercely: his passion rose to fever-heat. Marriage, which he hated and avoided, now occupied a prominent place in his designs. What on earth did the woman expect? he asked furiously of himself. Did she want a prince of the blood, that he, Alwyne Temple, who had been angled for by so many mothers and daughters,—women of title, too, by Jove!—was not good enough for her? Had she set her mind upon Jack, who, in his

cousin's opinion, could not hold a candle to himself in any respect, except perhaps his trumpery baronetcy? If she had been very religious, like his aunt, he might have imagined that she disapproved of episodes in his life that might have reached her ears; but no! she was a thorough woman of the world: no squeamishness of that sort would affect her. He would have asked Dulcie; but no chance presented itself.

For three days Mrs. Vernon's success was complete in keeping her daughter beside her; on the fourth she was attacked by a terrible migraine, which rendered her absolutely insensible and indifferent to anything but her own sufferings.

Dulcie spent the morning with the Chester family, and Alwyne, rejoicing in the discomfiture of his foe, made plans for outwitting her altogether. He took Jack into confidence and invoked his aid, and Jack, who was a victim to the tender passion at that moment, was only too ready to sympathize with and help his cousin.

A big carriage was to be ordered for the afternoon. Mrs. Chester, Lilah, Dulcie, and Alwyne were to go inside, and Jack on the box. When they came to a certain mountainous region, the three active members of the party were to descend and walk, and Jack was to leave the other pair to each other's society. Then Alwyne would ask for and receive explanations, and—well, who knew what the end of it might be?

All fell out as Alwyne had planned, and in due course, the walkers having alighted, the carriage having turned a corner, Jack having unaccountably disappeared, the two young people were to all intents and purposes alone in the wide world.

Alwyne's heart beat with unusual rapidity: he had very often been alone with a woman to whom he intended to make love, but, somehow, this was different: there was an unwonted excitement about it. In former cases it had generally been a foregone conclusion how his advances would be received, but now all was uncertainty. This pretty, charming girl blushed and smiled under his glances, but he had no proof that he had awakened any strong emotion in her modest breast, or that she was prepared to place her fate in his hands.



Alwyne's face was pale; his eyes shone with feverish brilliancy; for once in his life his supreme confidence in his own powers of pleasing failed him: he was more diffident in the presence of this young girl than he had ever felt since his first love-affair.

The moment had come when he was to put his fate "to the touch."

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## CHAPTER XI.

DULCIE's emotions were, taking into account her naturally phlegmatic disposition, considerably excited. Mingled with the pleasure of being in Alwyne's company, with a decided intuition of the nature of his feelings, were the elements of fear and uncertainty, and these had the effect of enhancing the situation and giving a keener interest to it. The love she had once imagined she felt for Noel had now transferred itself to Alwyne: indeed, she found him much handsomer and more attractive than poor Noel. In his case there was no obstacle of poverty, and she looked to him to save her from the fears, perplexities, and evil consequences of her past folly. She recognized now that it had been folly.

The feelings of both being worked up to a high pitch, it was not long before they broke into expression. Alwyne suddenly caught Dulcie's hand, and the electric current of sympathy flashed from one to the other. It saved the necessity for further preamble.

"My darling!" cried Alwyne, and caught fair Dulcie in his arms.

Modesty and a sense of fear not altogether painful caused the girl to resist his embrace, but she trembled so much that Alwyne led her to the bank and seated her there.

"Have I frightened you? What a brute I am!" he cried, with words and gestures suitable to the situation; for, in the nineteenth century, it is no longer possible to be original either in making love or anything else. And then he implored her to say she did not hate him, and Dulcie coyly reassured him.



"Tell me," he entreated, "why you have seemed to avoid me lately,—why I have never had a chance of saying a word alone to you."

Now, if in former times—that is to say, before the last three months—Dulcie had entertained any affection for her mother, it existed no longer, and she was only too glad of the opportunity of finding fault with and throwing blame upon her.

"It was mamma's doing," she said. "I do not know why, but she hates me to talk to any one or to do anything I want to."

Alwyne took a mental oath that his mother-in-law should be ousted from his *ménage* in the happy future.

"What an infernal shame, my darling!" he cried. "It is high time you were taken from her and given to some one who would never thwart you in a single wish."

Alwyne was probably not aware what a false and rash assertion he was making. Then he continued, eagerly,—

"Why should your mother object to me? What has she to say against me?"

"Oh," returned Dulcie, "she has never said anything against you, but I think she likes me to feel that I am entirely under her thumb, just as if I was ten years old."

"I do not care a straw what she thinks," cried Alwyne, disrespectfully, "if only I could know that you cared about me. Tell me, darling," once more taking her hand, "do you think you could love me? Will you be my wife?"

A sudden remembrance flashed across Dulcie of that scene in the registry office, and made her falter and hesitate for a moment.

Alwyne, in blissful ignorance of the thought that alarmed his beloved, saw only the diffidence of modesty in her hesitation, and pressed his suit with increased ardor.

Dulcie consented to his entreaties; the bond was sealed in the manner which custom and inclination dictate, and they then began to remember that the occupants of the carriage would be waiting for them.

"Will you tell your mother?" Alwyne asked, as they pursued their way, and Dulcie's face blanched as she cried,—

"Oh, no, no! Not for the world!"

"Then I will!" said Alwyne, with a boldness that comforted his betrothed,—“the very instant that she is well enough to see me.”

At this moment Sir John was seen in the distance waving frantically to them.

"Do not say a word to any one until you have seen mamma!" pleaded Dulcie, earnestly; and Alwyne promised; but he could not answer for his face, and that told its tale very plainly indeed.

Lilah was quite irritable when they reached the carriage.

"We thought you were never coming," she exclaimed, pettishly. "We shall not get home till midnight."

Alwyne and Dulcie were both so happy that they could afford to treat Lilah's petulance with good humor, and they apologized humbly for having kept her waiting. But she was cross, and would not speak all the way home.

"It was just like that selfish Alwyne," she said to herself, forgetting—poor little girl!—that the epithet applied with even greater force to herself.

When Dulcie entered the sitting-room on her return, she found her mother lying on the sofa drinking tea. Her head was better, although she still felt weak.

She did not reproach her daughter for having absented herself without leave, but it was evident from her manner that she was ill pleased.

"I shall not be well enough to dine at the *table-d'hôte*," she said; "so, as I do not care for you to dine there without me, I will order a cutlet for you up here."

"Surely," replied Dulcie, who did not relish the idea of a long evening *tête-à-tête* with her mother, "Mrs. Chester is sufficient chaperon for me."

"I do not wish you to dine down-stairs without me," repeated Mrs. Vernon, in a tone that was intended to put an end to the discussion.

The sullen look which often darkened Dulcie's face now came into it, and she left the room without another word. Mrs. Vernon sighed, as many a mother sighs who, after years of love and devotion to a child, finds herself repaid by hostility and coldness the moment she thwarts her in a love- or fancied love-matter.

The evening was no pleasant one. Three months ago

Dulcie would have been affectionate and sympathetic in any ailment of her mother's; to-night she was almost ostentatiously indifferent to Mrs. Vernon's discomfort, and did not make even the smallest inquiry about or reference to her sufferings. At half-past nine she went to bed.

It had been arranged between her and Alwyne that, if her mother was sufficiently recovered by the next morning to grant him an interview, Dulcie was to stand at the window at half-past ten, holding her handkerchief in her hand. If an interview was not to be hoped for, there would be no handkerchief.

It was with joy that Alwyne saw the little cambric token gently waving as he walked by the hotel. Ten minutes later a note was handed to Mrs. Vernon, asking her if she would permit Alwyne to do himself the honor of calling upon her in a quarter of an hour. Mrs. Vernon, groaning to herself, sent an answer saying that she would receive Mr. Temple at eleven o'clock. She then hurried to Dulcie's room to demand the explanation which she, alas! guessed too well. The young lady was not to be found. She had taken refuge in Morton's room, two flights of stairs higher up, and thither it did not occur to Mrs. Vernon to follow her. Swiftly she made up her mind how to act. She knew instinctively that Alwyne was prejudiced against her and regarded her as an adversary, and she half smiled to herself at the irony of fate as she thought how gladly and thankfully she would have listened to his suit but for Dulcie's mad folly.

Alwyne entered with a somewhat defiant air which he found it impossible to disguise; but he had sufficient good manners to inquire with some show of interest after Mrs. Vernon's health. He was a little surprised by the extreme graciousness and pleasantness of her manner, and insensibly his own became more genial, and he felt less antipathetic towards her. The nervousness which besets every suppliant for something he greatly desires and is not sure of obtaining nevertheless overcame him. His nether lip trembled slightly, and he drew his thick gold rings uneasily on and off his finger. But he plunged manfully into his subject.

"I don't know whether you are surprised at my asking you to see me, but—but . . . The fact is," he blurted out,



"I love your daughter, and I have come to ask your consent to—to my marrying her."

The sadness which Mrs. Vernon genuinely felt at not being able to give the answer she would so gladly have done stole into her face, and she said, very gently,—

"I am a little surprised, I must confess, at the suddenness of your proposal, as you have only known my dear child for such a very short time; but——" And she hesitated.

"Perhaps," exclaimed Alwyne, beginning to feel more hopeful at this reception, "you want to know something more about me, about my affairs,—whether I am in a position to——"

"No, no, indeed," interrupted Mrs. Vernon, with extreme graciousness. "I assure you I have no doubt whatever on that subject."

"Then may I hope——" cried Alwyne, eagerly; but Mrs. Vernon made a little negative gesture which stopped him in mid-sentence.

Mrs. Vernon had, when she willed it, a very charming manner, and now she availed herself of it to the utmost.

"I want you to believe," she said, almost caressingly, for his good looks and eager manner were eminently pleasing to her,—*"I want you to believe that I should like nothing better than to accept you as my daughter's husband, that all I know and have seen of you is entirely satisfactory to me, but that there are reasons, which have no reference of any kind to yourself, which make it impossible for me to consent to your engagement to her at present."*

A momentary silence; then Alwyne, looking at her with wide-open eyes, said,—

"You will surely, if such is the case, not object to telling me what those reasons are?"

Mrs. Vernon answered, with evident emotion,—

"It is most natural that you should ask; under the circumstances, you have every right to ask; and it makes me quite unhappy to think that it is utterly impossible for me to give you a straightforward answer. Do," looking almost piteously at him, "do try and have faith in me, and believe that I would not willingly put any obstacle between you and Dulcie."



Alwyne's heart grew cold. He doubted Mrs. Vernon: if there had really been any sufficient obstacle, Dulcie would not so readily have accepted him. He spoke with an air of injury.

"May I ask if Miss Vernon is aware of the obstacle of which you speak?"

It suddenly occurred to him that somewhere, in England or elsewhere, there might be a suitor whom this scheming mother considered more advantageous than himself, and whom she had hopes of entrapping.

Mrs. Vernon hesitated, then, after a pause, answered,—  
"She is not altogether aware of it."

Alwyne's temper rose.

"It is not very satisfactory," he answered, "to be refused without a reason. And I must say I consider it most unfair, not to say humiliating, to me. You say you have no personal objection to me, and yet you refuse me. I can only imagine there must be some other man in the case whom you think more desirable."

Mrs. Vernon gave a faintly-audible groan. More desirable! gracious heavens!

"Indeed there is not," she replied, with emphasis.

"There is *no* other man in the case!" uttered Alwyne, with a keen glance, his suspicions not being entirely allayed.

Mrs. Vernon objected to telling a deliberate lie.

"There are circumstances," she said, avoiding his gaze, "that make it impossible for me to entertain your proposal now, but they may be removed. If I could, I would gladly explain everything to you. Believe me, I quite understand your vexation, and even your doubts of me, but at the same time it is out of my power, at this moment, to be more explicit."

Alwyne was baffled and furious. What more was there for him to say?

"Will you allow me another interview with your daughter?" he asked, and, to his surprise, Mrs. Vernon answered,—

"Certainly. If you will come back in half an hour, you shall see her."

"And you will not compel her inclinations?" he inquired, with a mistrustful look.

"I will not. I will simply tell her the reason which I cannot at present tell you, and she shall then give you her answer."

Alwyne took his hat and went moodily away, full of anger and distrust. Still, it would go hard with him if he did not get the truth out of his darling ingenuous Dulcie.

The instant he left the room, Mrs. Vernon went again in search of her daughter, and this time successfully.

Dulcie was looking very nervous and ill at ease, nor was her mind reassured when she caught sight of the angry expression on her mother's face. Mrs. Vernon felt very bitter against the girl, and could not resist the taunt that rose to her lips.

"You have a very constant heart, I must say, and your love must be extremely valuable, when, after eloping with and marrying one man, you are ready to receive the declaration of another almost immediately afterwards!"

Dulcie trembled and turned very white. Somehow she had expected her mother's assistance and co-operation in this affair with Alwyne.

"You have placed me in a delightful position in sending Mr. Temple to propose to me for you."

"I thought——" murmured Dulcie, then suddenly broke down and hid her face in her hands.

Mrs. Vernon made a supreme effort to control herself. If she gave the rein to the anger which was boiling in her, she was aware that she would be tempted into some imprudence of speech and would foil her own designs.

After a silence of a minute, which it took her to suppress her feelings, she said, quietly,—

"You thought you were free from the consequences of your folly. I have made inquiries, and am by no means sure that such is the case. If Mr. Trevor recovers, it is quite possible that he may endeavor to prove the legality of the marriage. At all events, he may cause us a great deal of trouble and unpleasantness, and you will probably see that to accept any one else under such circumstances is entirely out of the question. It is impossible to tell the truth to Mr. Temple, who, in his indignation, would probably make the whole story public, and it is hardly likely that if he knew it he would wish to marry you. Still, Mr. Trevor may not recover; the story may never be

known; and then it would be quite possible for you to marry Mr. Temple. He is coming to see you in half an hour, as he declines to believe in an obstacle which I cannot explain to him: so I will leave you to think over what you mean to say to him. As you have brought this dilemma on yourself, you must get out of it as best you can."

"Oh," sobbed Dulcie, in terror, "I cannot, I will not see him! Oh, mamma, pray don't be so cruel! What can I do? what can I say?"

"Say anything, except that you went out of your mother's house and were clandestinely married at a registry office," answered Mrs. Vernon, pitilessly. "See him you must and shall, and you are at liberty to tell him any story you please. I shall not permit myself to be made a scapegoat of by you."

She went out and left Dulcie alone, crushed by the awful retribution that had fallen upon her. She had never in her life acted or decided anything for herself: until her meeting with Noel, her mother had commanded and arranged, and she had obeyed with blind docility; then, when Noel gained influence over her, his will had been her law. Responsibility was to her the most terrible thing in the world. She shrank shuddering from the thought of meeting Alwyne now,—of having to explain or try to explain matters to him. For what could she say? She would rather die than let him know the awful truth of which she was so bitterly ashamed. The security into which she had been lulled of late received a rude shock from her mother's words. Noel might give trouble, and might try to prove the legality of the marriage! To be the wife of a poor man no longer seemed an enviable, delightful lot in her eyes: she was not aware that at twenty-one, or on her marriage sanctioned by the court, she would come into a comfortable little fortune of her own.

She was half minded to put on her hat and rush from the hotel to avoid the dreaded interview, but the idea occurred to her that her mother would probably be on the watch against her escape, or that, worse still, she might run straight into the arms of Alwyne, who would not be far off. There was only one thing for it,—to throw herself upon the mercy of her mother, who was so strong and



so clever, and who never had any difficulty about knowing what to do. Hastily she dried her tears, bathed her eyes, and ran to the sitting-room.

"Mamma," she cried, flinging herself on her knees beside her mother, "I implore you not to be unkind to me. Oh, do—do tell me what to say! I will say anything you wish, but I cannot think for myself."

Mrs. Vernon was slightly mollified.

"It is simple enough," she said. "You must say that you cannot accept him at present, and that you cannot now explain to him why, but that you hope he will remain your friend. He will of course try every persuasion in his power to get the truth from you; but that I think I can rely on your not telling him."

"Mamma," pleaded Dulcie, "*must* I see him? Oh, dear mamma, will you not see him again instead? Pray, pray do, and I will never disobey you again!" In her cowardice she would have promised anything.

"No, thank you, my dear," returned Mrs. Vernon, dryly. "I have gone through one interview with Mr. Temple, and that is enough for me. Besides, I promised that you should see him; and you must."

Dulcie sat on the floor, looking the image of despair.

There came a knock at the door. A waiter announced Mr. Temple. Dulcie sprang to her feet, blushing like a carnation, and Mrs. Vernon, without a word, left the room, and the lovers together.

Alwyne's eyes flashed with pleasure. He advanced swiftly, and with one hand took Dulcie's and put the other round her. But she drew back frightened. Good heavens! if she were really Noel's wife, it would be a crime to receive such attentions from another man.

"No, no," she gasped; but he, being strong and wilful, held her with gentle force and kissed her whether she would or no.

"Now, darling," he cried, "tell me all about everything!" for, now that she was here, within his grasp, he made light in his heart of any obstacle.

Dulcie trembled, and wished the floor would open and swallow her.

"No, really," she expostulated, "you must not; indeed you must not. Please do not."



Whereupon Alwyne released her, thinking that modesty was delightful in theory, but a confounded nuisance in practice.

"It is quite true what mamma told you," she faltered. "I did not know before, but, but——"

"Well," said Alwyne, "but you at all events, my darling, will tell me why. I know," tenderly taking her hand, "that you are not indifferent to me: you would not willingly make me wretched. Tell me, sweet love," gently, "what can there possibly be that you need mind telling me. Don't you know that I adore you?"

For all answer to his entreaty, Dulcie hid her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

For so impetuous and self-willed a young man, Alwyne behaved with great forbearance. He drew her hands gently from her face, he kissed away the tears that streamed from her eyes, and was as gentle and tender as any woman could have been. Dulcie made no resistance now; her natural weakness took refuge in his strength: she submitted, and wished for nothing better than to shelter herself in this new rock of defence.

If only there were no awful reason to be given!

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## CHAPTER XII.

ALWYNE had felt certain that the gentle and yielding Dulcie would not be able to keep the truth from him; but he found it just as impossible to get a definite answer from her as from her mother.

"At least," he cried, his patience presently wearing to an end, "at least tell me one thing. Is there any other man whom your mother wants you to marry?"

"No," answered Dulcie, truthfully enough.

"Will you swear that?" he said.

"Yes," she replied.

Alwyne got up and walked to the window in high perplexity. Several ideas passed rapidly through his mind, none of which, however, seemed to him sufficiently plausi-

ble. A reason which Dulcie had not known yesterday, but the force of which she recognized the moment she learned it from her mother, and the absolute necessity for secrecy in the matter!

There was no other man in the case! Then, with a view to allaying his latest suspicion, he came back, and said, gently,—

"Can you never give me any hope that you will be my wife?"

Dulcie hesitated.

"I may," she faltered, "if you will only wait. Oh, if you would only be a little patient, all may come right!"

Was ever a man placed in so perplexing, so maddening a situation! If Alwyne had not been so much in love, he would have been very angry; but this unexpected resistance and opposition increased his passion, and as he looked at the pretty tear-stained face, that was not disfigured by crying, as most women's faces are, he felt that he would put up with a great deal to win her.

"It is awfully hard on me," he said; then, bending over her, "Tell me, darling, that you really love me, that you will some day be mine, and then I will try to be patient."

Any hankering that Dulcie may have ever entertained after a romantic situation must have been gratified to the full at this moment. Pleasure and fear were mingled in exact proportion,—pleasure at the love she inspired, fear at the thought that she might be committing a crime in listening to the avowal of it. Then she shuddered to remember that she was perhaps the wife of a decrepit invalid,—an imbecile; and she glanced up at Alwyne's straight figure and fine features glowing with passion. Romantic situations are not always delightful to the actors who take part in them.

Dulcie did not answer his entreaty in so many words, but there was nothing in her manner or behavior that forbade him to hope.

"But," he said, presently, "what is to happen now? Am I not to be allowed to see you or write to you? How long am I to be kept on tenter-hooks?" And here his natural irritability came to the front.

"It depends on mamma," answered Dulcie, disingenuously.

A brilliant idea came to Alwyne.

"My darling," he cried, "why should not you and I defy your mother and go off and get married without her knowing anything about it?"

"No, no," said Dulcie, shuddering.

It was a horrible coincidence that he too should make this proposition.

The door opened, and Mrs. Vernon reappeared on the scene. The young people had had quite time enough, she thought, to say all they had to say, and she felt the deepest distrust of Dulcie. Heaven alone knew what folly she was capable of! It would be necessary, she reflected, for her to have a few more words with Alwyne, and, unpleasant as it was, the duty must not be shirked.

"I hope," she said gently to him, "you are satisfied that my behavior is not influenced by any mere arbitrary feeling." Then, as he was stiffly silent, she continued, "There are family reasons which render it imperative that I should be silent for a certain time. As soon as I am able to give you an explanation, I shall do so, if you still desire it. You must remember that I have not given you any encouragement to make advances to my daughter, but, on the contrary, the moment I saw an inclination on your part for her society, I did my best to keep you from being alone with her."

Alwyne preserved his hostile manner.

"My position is a most unpleasant one," he said. "I am neither refused nor accepted. I am simply put off with what I must say seem to me very unreasonable excuses. I love your daughter, and have no intention of giving her up as long as she cares for me. Am I to be allowed to see her, or may I ask what your intentions on the subject are?"

"If you continue to see her," answered Mrs. Vernon, with determination, "it must be only as any ordinary friend might. I warn you that I shall not permit you to be alone in her company after to-day. And, if you will take my advice, you will leave Nice and will not approach us again until a time, if it should ever come, when we are able to welcome you as you desire."

Alwyne's eyes blazed: his temper was getting the better of him. He turned to Dulcie.



"Do you agree to this?" he said, in a voice which he had the utmost difficulty in controlling.

Dulcie shivered and looked down on the ground.

"Do you?" he reiterated, his voice getting still more beyond him.

"Oh," she cried, terrified at his tone, looking from him to her mother, and not reassured by what she saw in either face, "we *must* do what mamma thinks right."

"Then of course," said Alwyne, turning suddenly from fire to ice, "there is nothing more for me to say."

And, taking his hat and making a gesture of stiff salutation, he left the room.

Mrs. Vernon reflected with some vindictiveness that it would be an excellent punishment for Dulcie to be handed over to a husband with a temper like Alwyne's.

Then, whilst Dulcie wept helplessly, she sat down and penned a telegram to her lawyer:

*"What news of invalid?"*

In the course of the afternoon she received an answer:

*"Still in apathetic state. Removed from hospital by friends yesterday."*

As Alwyne was rushing frantically up the hotel staircase to his room, he ran into his cousin's arms.

"Halloo!" said Jack. "Where are you off to?"

Alwyne stopped short.

"I say," he remarked, with a sudden inspiration, "let us go over to Monte Carlo! I want to get out of this. Do come, like a good chap! I am awfully bothered and worried. I believe I shall go mad if I don't have some one to talk to."

Jack would have demurred, but, seeing that Alwyne was really upset, he good-naturedly gave way.

"All right," he said. "I'll just go and tell them. There's a train in a quarter of an hour."

Poor Jack was himself in a bad way mentally. He was hanging on here day by day, and what for? he asked himself miserably. He knew there was no hope for him; the place bored him to distraction; not once had he seen or heard anything of Reine; and yet he felt as though he could not tear himself from the spot until he had at all events seen her once again. Mrs. Pierpoint, who was to



have come over the day after his visit to Cannes, had caught cold, which confined her for a couple of days to her room; after that, she had been occupied with moving to her villa, so Jack had seen nothing of her. He had read Reine's poems over and over again; he had possessed himself of her other book, and in turn his soul was vexed and fascinated over the pages, and, he felt unsettled and miserable, as he had never in his life felt before, not even under the influence of the passion from which he had manfully torn himself free. He was quite in a condition to sympathize with Alwyne, and as they had the railway-carriage to themselves during the short journey, he listened with the greatest interest to Alwyne's tirade of love, disappointment, invective.

What did it—what could it mean? Alwyne cried, over and over again. Was ever a man in this world placed in such a position? It was enough to drive him to desperation, to madness! Jack admitted all this. The only comfort he could suggest was that there was no other man in the case.

"But how can we tell?" cried Alwyne. "That woman!" loading his desired mother-in-law with opprobrious epithets, "is capable of telling any lie,—a blanked intriguing old cat! And that dear little innocent thing is so shy, so sensitive, and so easily frightened; she is under her mother's thumb to such a degree that she could terrify her into swearing anything. Why, if I," and Alwyne dwelt with conscious pride on the I, "could not get anything out of her, you may take your oath how crushed she is! My belief is that there is another man—some fellow with a title or something or other—she thinks there's a chance of getting hold of. Perhaps"—lashing himself into a rage—"he's coming out here, and then, if he don't propose, she may fall back upon me. Why, man alive, what other reason can there be?"

Jack was unable to suggest any.

"It is very mysterious, certainly," he said, "and mysteries are exceedingly disagreeable; but then," and his own heart sank as he said it, "you see, it isn't as if you were utterly without hope."

"I don't know what to be at!" cried Alwyne. "This sort of thing plays the devil with one. To go on seeing

the girl day after day, and never to get a chance of being alone with her, will drive me mad. And yet I feel as if I *can't* tear myself away."

How well poor Jack could sympathize with him!

"And the first time in my life I ever wanted to marry!" Alwyne went on, desperately. "Why, this time last week I'd have laid you a thousand to ten against the possibility of such a thing happening. You know, Jack, how I loathed the idea."

"I suppose," replied Jack, "that if one likes a woman in the right sort of way, and she is free, marrying her is the thing one does think of."

The train pulled up. The young men jumped out. A moment later Jack's heart was in his mouth, and his face was aflame, for there, in the act of alighting from a railway-carriage, was Mrs. Chandos.

He rushed eagerly forward to her assistance. To his delight, she was only accompanied by another lady, to whom she at once introduced him. Alwyne was already acquainted with her friend.

Mrs. Chandos greeted Jack so kindly that a wild happiness took possession of him. He would think, she said, smiling, that she lived at Monte Carlo; but, in reality, this was only her second visit this season, and she was only here now because it was such a lovely day, and Mrs. Herbert had insisted on coming.

Mrs. Herbert joined in the conversation.

"I felt the want of a little excitement," she said, "and I have brought a few louis to gamble with. Reine is shocked: she never gambles: she will sit on the terrace and look at the view whilst I lose my money."

Mrs. Herbert was a tall, fair, delicate-looking woman, with a distinguished air and a pleasant voice, apparently some ten years older than Reine.

"Mrs. Herbert," said Alwyne, addressing himself to her, "I am sure you have not breakfasted. Will you and Mrs. Chandos do us the honor of breakfasting with us first? and then we will go and enjoy a gamble. I also have brought a little money to dispose of."

"I am dying of hunger," she answered, pleasantly, "and it would be very nice to have a table together."

By which she intended to convey to him that, though

she and her friend would lunch in their company, she did not intend to be their guests.

Alwyne called a carriage, put the ladies into it, and he and Jack walked up through the grounds and arrived in time to receive them at the hotel.

"This is great luck!" exclaimed Alwyne to his cousin. "I shall see whether I can't get something out of Mrs. Chandos. You, Jack, like a good fellow, take Mrs. Herbert off: you will find her an awfully nice woman."

Jack's face fell about two inches. This was indeed a severe test of friendship. To take off the nicest woman in the world and to leave Reine to another man seemed an unbearable hardship. Alwyne, engrossed though he was with himself, could not fail to remark the deep chagrin written on every line of Jack's countenance.

"I say, old chap," he said, "you must really remember how immensely important this is to me,—almost a matter of life and death, you know. I promise you shall have your chance afterwards: only let me get Mrs. Chandos alone for half an hour."

Nothing could have been cheerier than this little party of four. Mrs. Herbert and Reine had the pleasing effect of bringing out each other's liveliest and brightest qualities in public. Many women can only be gay and vivacious at the expense of making a noise and attracting attention, but these two were brilliant examples of how bright and pleasant ladies may be in an entirely undemonstrative fashion. Mrs. Herbert at once took a great fancy to Jack, whose frank manner and kindly face impressed her agreeably, and it was not five minutes before she was perfectly aware of what he imagined to be a secret tightly locked in his own breast. She resolved to help him, for, although she was herself a widow devoutly thankful for her freedom and keenly alive to its advantages, she had, as Reine said, an absurd notion that every other woman would be the better for having a husband.

If Jack had been able to think of anything or any one but Reine, he would doubtless have at once reciprocated her good feeling; but during luncheon he could scarcely take his eyes from Mrs. Chandos, and Alwyne, remembering that he was going to carry off the apple of his cousin's eye presently, devoted himself to Mrs. Herbert. And,



truth to tell, if it had not been for his eagerness to elicit something bearing on his own affairs from Reine, he would have preferred the society of the other lady. She was always such good company and so pleasant: she never did or said anything to wound the *amour-propre* of any man, unless he ventured on a liberty of speech, and that was a very rare event.

It was with great reluctance, although his good breeding prevented him from giving evidence of it, that when, after luncheon, they adjourned to the Casino, Jack fell behind with Mrs. Herbert as Alwyne led the way with her friend. But ere long he was tolerably reconciled to his fate, for his companion adroitly broached the subject that was so near his heart, and then, professing surprise at his knowing so little of Cannes, raised him to a seventh heaven by proposing that she and Mrs. Chandos should make him better acquainted with it.

Meantime, Alwyne had conducted his companion to a sheltered spot in the gardens, and was proceeding to confide in her. For he had not the gift of reticence, and, if a thing engrossed his thoughts, insisted on talking of it *ad nauseam* to any one to whom he chose for the moment to unbosom himself.

Reine listened with no little surprise. She did not permit the feeling to show itself in her face or manner: these were both sympathetic and interested as she gave ear to the outburst of Alwyne's passion, perplexity, and despair. But she wondered secretly how her aunt could for a moment have permitted him to hope under the circumstances, —have allowed him to approach Dulcie with words of love whilst she was another man's wife. It then occurred to her that Mrs. Vernon might possibly have had tidings of the husband's death, either actual or imminent: indeed, that was the only way in which she could reconcile to herself her aunt's conduct in the matter. Even then she could not thoroughly approve.

It was evident that Alwyne hoped to extract some clew to the secret from her, but, whilst listening with every mark of sympathy to his recital, she disclaimed all knowledge of her aunt's reasons and objections, and confined herself entirely to speaking in kind and affectionate terms of Dulcie. Alwyne, baffled in the most important par-



ticular, still derived no little comfort and pleasure from talking about the object of his affections. He went so far as to implore Mrs. Chandos's good offices in his behalf. She asked him, smiling, why he should want any assistance when he had so much to recommend him? He was so much pleasanter in the humble phase of non-accepted suitor than she had ever before seen him, that Reine was inclined to revoke her previous judgment of him. And Alwyne, who had up to this time been rather spiteful and ill disposed towards her, vowed that she was really a charming woman, and, having talked to her about himself unweariedly for the space of an hour, began to reflect that perhaps he ought to let Jack have a turn, and assented to his companion's proposal that they should go and look for the other members of the party.

Mrs. Herbert and Jack were still at the tables. They had been playing with varying success, and were now a little to the good. Alwyne made his venture, won; staked again, won; again, won; again, lost; doubled his stake, and ended by losing.

The ladies expressed a wish to go to the concert-room, and thither they repaired, Alwyne now devoting himself to Mrs. Herbert. A strange shyness had come over Jack, —an unjust sense of self-depreciation. He felt that Reine must think him a fool and be bored by him. But that lady was in an excellent humor, and talked gayly to him in the intervals between the music, and his diffidence gave way to a feeling of supreme happiness. His tongue was unloosed; he was no longer shy and silent; the world's face seemed to have changed when they emerged into the sunshine: if this was not Paradise, he wanted no fairer one.

When, in the train, Mrs. Herbert invited the young men to lunch with them next day, Reine cordially seconded the invitation. Jack accepted joyfully, Alwyne with reserve. He was not sure in his own heart that he could tear himself away from Dulcie. For, so far from having any intention of leaving Nice, he had resolved that he would stay near his beloved and see her and fair play at the same time.

At dinner that evening he sat opposite Dulcie, and his eyes were so full of expressive fire, and his glances at her

pretty face so long and ardent, that Mrs. Vernon, who sat on thorns lest his very marked conduct should excite attention, took a sudden resolve. As they left the dining-room, Mrs. Chester joined her, and Alwyne was enabled to approach Dulcie; but, by a sudden turn of the head, the distracted mother saw him put a note into her hand. The moment Mrs. Vernon reached their sitting-room, having declined Mrs. Chester's pressing invitation to join their party both for herself and Dulcie, she turned to her daughter and said, in a tone that frightened the girl,—

"Read Mr. Temple's letter at once!"

Dulcie demurred, but Mrs. Vernon insisted, almost with violence, and Dulcie gave in and read it tremblingly.

Her mother watched her sternly.

"It is, I presume, a love-letter. No, do not be afraid," as Dulcie instinctively put it behind her back. "I have no wish to see it. I have only this to say to you. Mr. Trevor is alive and likely to live, and he *is* your husband."

Then, whilst Dulcie, white as death, sank half fainting on the sofa, Mrs. Vernon passionately seized her desk, and wrote on a sheet of paper,—

"Either you, or I and my daughter, leave Nice to-morrow. If I find in the morning that you are still here, we go by the afternoon train."

She directed it to "Alwyne Temple, Esq.," and ringing the bell, gave it to the waiter to be delivered at once.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. HERBERT and Reine had dined, and were drinking coffee in the pretty *salon* of their villa. Mrs. Herbert was lying on a couch drawn towards the cheerful wood fire, and Reine sat half buried in a big chair, with her feet reposing on a footstool and warming at the blaze. She seemed engrossed with her thoughts, as indeed she was. A strong sense of honor was one of her chief attributes, and she was at a loss to understand how her aunt, for whom she had a certain respect and esteem, could have

acted towards Alwyne Temple in so disingenuous a manner. Mrs. Herbert's voice broke in upon her reflections.

"My love," it said, "what is your busy brain cogitating so deeply about?"

Reine looked up and smiled.

"It is quite at your service, if you have any ideas to suggest to it."

"Only quite trivial ones," replied her friend. "I think we had a very pleasant day, and I found our cavaliers most agreeable."

"Yes," assented Reine, but without much enthusiasm.

"Mr. Temple is remarkably handsome," pursued Mrs. Herbert, "but I prefer his cousin. He looks so kind and good-tempered."

"Alwyne Temple has improved, I think," observed Reine. "I never liked him so well as to-day. He was much less self-assertive than usual."

"By the way, what were you and he so engrossed in, and where did you disappear to?"

Mrs. Chandos had few secrets from her friend, with whom she lived on terms of affectionate intimacy, so she did not hesitate to tell her about Alwyne's attraction to her cousin, though she gave no hint of Dulcie's secret.

"Between ourselves, strictly between ourselves, Mia, he has fallen in love with my pretty cousin, and, as he is a young gentleman of an impetuous disposition, he is dreadfully perturbed because he is not received by my aunt with open arms."

"But, my love, he has lots of money," exclaimed Mrs. Herbert. "Why is he not received with open arms?"

"Really, Mia," returned Reine, with a shade of impatience, "you are just like every other woman. If a man has money, there is no consideration of any possible sort or kind of sufficient importance to stand in his way."

"After all," smiled Mrs. Herbert, with an apologetic little air, "you know, poetess though you are, that that is a very big consideration. Comfort and luxury are by no means words of empty sound in your ears, my love."

"Oh, no doubt everything is easier to be endured by means of money," returned Reine; "but do you think, if I were given the choice of happiness or money, I should hesitate?"

"There is no such thing as happiness," replied Mrs. Herbert, didactically: "as the old conundrum says, the only place where it is always to be found is in the dictionary. Our life is made up of toleration, endurance, with occasional flashes of hope and pleasure and frequent long periods of suffering and misery. Physical comfort makes toleration easier than anything else; money gives physical comfort. But, after all, why is this rich and handsome young man not received with open arms? Is your aunt ambitious? is she bent on a title?"

"I have not seen her," replied Reine, "since the day when she and Dulcie first made his acquaintance. You remember, Mia, I told you of the meeting."

"But is he refused for good and all?"

"He was evidently not accepted. And nothing in the world could be so calculated to increase his devotion as a little opposition."

"Is that why it is done, do you think?"

"I must hear what my aunt says," returned Reine, evasively. "I think of going over to Nice again before the end of the week."

"Not to stay!" exclaimed her friend. "I really won't have you go away again to stay! I am wretched without you, and your aunt cannot want you half as much as I do."

"No, only for the day," said Reine.

Mrs. Herbert gave a sigh of relief.

"That is all right," she said. "Reine, my dear, do you know I think Sir John Chester has fallen in love with you?"

"Do you?" observed Reine, indifferently. "You generally think that of every man."

"I may be forgiven if I do, since it not unfrequently happens. But I approve of Sir John much more than of most of your suitors."

"Have you ascertained, Mia," asked her friend, with slightly-veiled sarcasm, "that he has money enough to insure toleration of life—and of himself?"

"How dare you speak in that tone to me?" laughed Mrs. Herbert. "You know it is quite impossible for you to crush me as you do impertinent acquaintances who take liberties."



"You are too frail to be crushed," answered Reine, with a smile.

"Thanks for your magnanimity. But now what do you think of him yourself?"

"I have not thought much about him at present," said Reine. "But to please you"—assuming an air of reflection—"I will. I think"—pausing and appearing to deliberate—"he looks very English, very clean, very good-tempered. He has beautiful teeth. And—ah, yes, by the way, he behaves charmingly to his mother and to that poor little invalid sister. Yes, Mia, I think he is an excellent type of a young English sportsman. I feel sure he is a straight rider and a good shot, and I dare say plays cricket and lawn-tennis and is good all round at country pursuits."

Mrs. Herbert surveyed her friend critically.

"How heartless you are!" she said.

"I wish I were!" returned Reine, with a profound sigh.

"Take courage: you will be in time," smiled Mrs. Herbert, changing her tone to a light one, "and when that time comes you will arrive at the nearest approach possible to happiness. I, thank heaven, have worn my heart out. It used to give me an immense deal of trouble. For twenty years—from fifteen to thirty-five—it was the curse of my life. I was always loving, or wanting to love, and, when I did, consuming and fretting myself to a shadow about the object or fancied object of my affection. Now," gayly, "my heart has completely frittered itself away. I could not love if Jupiter himself put on his most seductive shape to fascinate me. No human being is necessary to my existence; there is no one whom I could not do without, except," laughing, "you, my love, whilst I am here. The real compensation of growing old is, as far as my experience goes, the fading of those turbulent emotions that were the joy and the despair of one's youth. I am not easily disappointed, because I expect nothing; pleasure-seeking has become an intolerable bore to me; the society of a few people I like, fresh air, beautiful scenery, are the only things I care for, and, if I had but a digestion and an appetite worth dignifying by the name and could enjoy the pleasures of the table, I should look upon old age as an unmitigated boon."

"How you talk, Mia!" interrupted Reine. "Any one would think you were seventy."

"I am a hundred and seventy," replied Mrs. Herbert, "and I watch the passions and griefs and loves of you young people from afar, with a sort of amused wonder that you can attach so much importance to them, and with total oblivion of the fact that I was ever a victim to the same passions myself. It is a never-ending marvel to me that years can so entirely change our views on almost every subject: the change, they tell us, that is worked in our constitutions is as nothing to it. Fifteen years ago I was excitable, jealous, exacting, ambitious, with the most pronounced ideas on almost every subject; now I am calm, tolerant, indifferent, unprejudiced, and absolutely heedless of social advancement. I can see that there are two sides to every question, and so much to be said on both that it is easier to let the whole matter slide than to attempt to arrive at an absolute conclusion about it. I used to rebel against what I thought the injustice and cruelty of life; I insisted on prying into the motives and reasons of things, and was deeply indignant because satisfactory answers were not presented to my intelligence. I now take refuge in the doctrine of the Unknowable, and have left off asking questions. No one can explain to me the great enigma of life and suffering. I listen to the various arguments with which people who think they know attempt from time to time to convince me. I never contradict them; I smile and let them imagine they have produced their effect, but each successive argument makes me more certain that the mystery is unknown and unknowable. I no longer beat my wings against the bars of my cage: I doze on my perch and hail the end with tolerable composure. I have even given up asking, except once now and then when I am more ill or suffering than usual, 'What is the good of anything?' If good there is, we shall know it some day; if we are only puppets of blind force, why, then we shall have fulfilled our purpose, and the end will have come, and there will be no more need for asking questions."

Reine sat upright in her chair, with signs of strong emotion in her expressive face.

"Ah, Mia," she exclaimed, "it is all very well for you

to talk; you are fortunate to have arrived at such a contented frame of mind; but what about those who do rebel, who cannot help rebelling, because they feel that they have been deluded and cheated? that high ideas, thoughts, aspirations, have been given them which they can never realize? that they are mocked and disappointed through the very instinct which seemed highest and purest?"

"My dear child," replied Mrs. Herbert, "it is a great pity that you ever met Henry Bertram."

"The best friend I ever had or ever shall have," interrupted Reine, warmly.

"The worst as a 'philosopher and guide.' His effect on you morally was as that of a *bon vivant*, who gives the prescription that has cured his gout to a poor man who is starving for want of generous food. It would have been far better for you, my love, though you won't agree with me, if when you were suffering from disappointment and heart-soreness you had come across a priest or a religious enthusiast, who could have given you something to prop up your faltering faith, instead of taking away what slender support was still left and leaving you to fall prone to earth."

"It is far better to know and face the truth," cried Reine, impetuously.

"But what is truth?" asked Mrs. Herbert. "To my way of thinking, utter sceptics like our friend are further from it than any one else. Henry is a man, strong mentally and physically; he is perpetually occupied; his digestion is excellent; he is devoid of sentiment, therefore his unbelief causes him no inconvenience of any kind. He has no mental weakness, so a personal God is unnecessary to him; he has healthy, honorable instincts which guide his life correctly and enable him to be quite comfortable without religion. He thought he was doing you a great kindness when, seeing your mind rent with doubt, trouble, and inquietude, he tried to tear up what he considered a miserable superstition from before your stumbling feet. It was like a strong man taking the crutches from a cripple and saying, 'See how well I walk. Throw away those wretched devices, which are really of no use to you, and walk erect and straight as I do.'"



"But, Mia, you know that you believe in very little yourself."

"I do not admit that," returned Mrs. Herbert. "As a matter of fact, I do not know how much or how little I believe. I find it best not to continue interrogating myself on the subject. If I am content to bow to the unalterable power which I acknowledge, and to accept destiny without questioning, it seems to me as though I may perhaps be demonstrating the highest form of faith. But, my love, when, in autumn, the creepers that twine themselves round a tree gradually and naturally unloose their clinging arms and drop to earth, it is very different from those whose strong tendrils are torn violently away in their full flowering-time. You want a counteracting influence. You are young,—well," as Reine shook her head, "let us say comparatively young, for, though six-and-twenty seemed very old to me when I was seventeen, I now look upon it as the most charming and fascinating period of a woman's life. From twenty-five to thirty-five a woman ought to rule every one she chooses to rule,—that is, a woman who is clever and charming,—a woman like you, Reine. Do you know that the best part of your life is before you? Do you know that if you were to love now, to love a good, kind, honorable man,—we won't say anything about his being very clever,—you might still be a happy woman, and win back your old beliefs, or, at all events, the best part of them?"

And Mrs. Herbert's gray eyes grew quite eager in their expression, and she looked affectionately at Reine.

"Love and I are strangers," answered Reine, with a sigh, sinking back in her chair. "I could not love now, because I could not believe. Perhaps, dear Mia, I shall get to your contented frame of mind some day, and think the greatest blessing is to feel that no one is necessary to my existence."

"But, my dear child, I did not feel that at your age, and I do not think any one gets to feel it till he has suffered great unhappiness and disappointment. The greatest source of your unhappiness now is your imagination: you live in a world of your own, and you want to idealize every one with whom you come in contact. Your inclination is to believe everything that glitters to be gold, and



you take it as a personal injury that when the test-acid of experience is applied it corrodes. You shut your eyes and idealize, and when you open them and look at reality it seems coarse and brutal. If you were less critical and more disposed to give the rein to your natural warmth of heart and affection, you would be a much happier woman. It is of no use at your age and with your nature to try to starve your heart. Find some man who is honorable, to be trusted, and devoted to you, and don't insist on idealizing him and expecting all sorts of impossible things of him, but be content to love him, and, if you must weigh his demerits occasionally, put his good qualities in the other scale, and balance the two fairly. Women of your sort were not meant to live alone: sympathy and companionship are absolute necessities. Why, even I, in spite of all I say," with a sad little smile, "feel at times that to have some one to whom I was necessary, whose life was bound up in mine, would be a blessing worth paying a tolerably severe penalty for. But I do not allow myself to dwell on the idea, and immediately proceed to thank heaven that Fortune has no hostages of mine, and to tell myself that to care for any one or anything is to widen the joints of one's armor and let the shafts of misfortune enter and pierce one. You see, my love, the great difference between us is that I am resigned to my lot, and probably could not alter it if I wished, whereas you are not resigned, and your fate is, humanly speaking, in your own hands."

"I wish I had never been born!" said Reine, in a tone of the deepest despondency.

"That is what I have wished all my life," replied Mrs. Herbert. "I could never understand the intense love of life which some people have who think 'only to live' such a tremendous boon. Of course there have been times when I have been exhilarated by air and sunshine and the presence of those I loved into being momentarily glad of life; but the feeling has been transitory. I dislike the idea of dying, because of the mystery and doubt, the fears, mental and physical, that surround the act of dying; but to be dead always seems desirable to me, and infinitely more desirable, as the Preacher said, it is never to have been born at all. There is only one thing that could reconcile me to life, and that would be the knowledge that I had

been of use in my generation; that I had made others the better for me; that I had prevented a great deal of suffering and caused a great deal of happiness. I, like every one else, love my own individuality, and should hate to change it, but there is one man, whom I do not know and never met, with whom I would gladly change places at any moment, and that is Lord S——. When I think of the incalculable misery he has prevented and ameliorated, the amazing amount of good he has done, I say to myself, 'A life like that is worth living, in spite of any amount of personal misfortune, disappointment, or discouragement.' What are the triumphs of the most beautiful woman or the greatest statesman compared with these?"

"Mia, dearest," interposed Reine, with some anxiety, "you are exciting yourself too much, and will have one of your bad nights, I am afraid."

"Quite true. my little Mentor. I will be calm." And Mrs. Herbert settled herself back among her cushions. "Let us turn to a less exciting theme. How shall we amuse our young men to-morrow?"

"I think, Mia, it was very rash of you to ask them. I fear they will be bored, and I am quite sure we shall."

"I am not sure of anything of the sort," returned her friend. "I mean to make myself very agreeable, and, as you know, I am extremely fond of good-looking young men."

"I beg your pardon, dear Mia. I ought to have remembered that no one could be bored in your pleasant company. I was selfishly thinking of myself."

"Let us pray for a fine day," said Mrs. Herbert. "We will have luncheon first, and then take them for a drive: that will get over the afternoon charmingly."

"Arrange everything as you please, my dear."

"But you will second me, Reine? you promise not to be *distracte* or disdainful?"

"Mia, did you ever know me to fail in my duty as hostess or part-hostess?"

"No, I don't think I ever did. Now I am going to read my book and calm my excited mind," said Mrs. Herbert; "and I advise you to do the same. It is a good thing to exchange one's own ideas for those of some one else."

But Reine leaned back in her chair, and her thoughts wandered off to dreamland; and when she came back from that far country there were tears in her eyes.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. VERNON'S note was handed to Alwyne in the Chesters' sitting-room, where he and Jack had repaired after dinner. Mrs. Chester was with Lilah, who had one of her headaches.

As he read, Alwyne's face blanched: then he threw the note to his cousin. Jack, having read, looked up sympathetically.

"I am awfully sorry," he said. "I suppose there is nothing for it but to go."

Alwyne gave vent to his anger in furious and passionate language. He heaped invectives on Mrs. Vernon, and raved and stormed about the room like a madman. Men are not frightened by each other's violence, and Jack, if a trifle disgusted by his cousin's want of self-control, uttered no remonstrance, but waited until he should recover some degree of calmness. When Alwyne had partly inveighed away his fury, Mrs. Chester came into the room, and, seeing his handsome face all distraught and perturbed, stopped point-blank.

"My dear boy," she exclaimed, kindly, "what has happened?"

Alwyne, nothing loath, poured forth the recital of his wrongs. He would have confided them to a perfect stranger in his present mood.

Mrs. Chester was a kind woman, and her nephew's distress excited her sympathy at once. She tried to console him with the thought that his rejection was only temporary, and that perhaps everything would come right in the end. But Alwyne, like a spoiled child, passionately refused to be consoled, and declared that he had been shamefully used and was the victim of a mercenary, designing, heartless woman who was only waiting to sell that poor innocent darling, Dulcie, to a higher bidder.



He implored his aunt's mediation. Would she see Mrs. Vernon and try to get the truth out of her? When Mrs. Chester demurred, and said that she could not possibly interfere in so delicate a matter, he grew very angry indeed, swore that every one was in league against him, and went out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Jack, though he mentally resented Alwyne's rudeness to his mother, felt that this was not the time to take notice of it, and only remarked apologetically that he was afraid Alwyne was terribly cut up and had lost his head a little.

"I am sorry for him, of course," returned Mrs. Chester, who had all along been ill pleased with Alwyne's attentions to Dulcie, and perhaps in her heart of hearts felt that his sufferings were not wholly undeserved; "but I can quite understand that Mrs. Vernon wishes to see and know a great deal more of him before trusting her dear child's happiness to him. I fear Alwyne will make but a very indifferent husband, and that any girl who marries him will have a great deal to put up with from his violent and uncontrollable temper."

"Dulcie Vernon is a dear, amiable little girl," said Jack, "just the sort to suit him, because she would not oppose him. Alwyne is a very good fellow if he is not contradicted."

"I am afraid she is much too good for him," replied Mrs. Chester. "I think she will make an excellent wife, and deserves a better fate than to become the slave of a selfish, tyrannical man."

Mrs. Chester, good and kind as she was, could not help showing the soreness she felt, for she had fondly pictured amiable Dulcie as the happy and fortunate wife of one of the kindest and best men in the world,—namely, her own dear son.

"My dear mother, don't be too hard on the poor chap!" urged Jack. "He has always been rather spoiled, you know, and just now he is very hard hit."

Presently Jack went to seek his cousin, and found him sitting in his room with a gloomy expression of face, having passed from the passionate to the melancholy stage. After a time he allowed himself to be persuaded to go out and smoke a cigar on the Promenade, and, having talked



for an hour and a half about his woes and wrongs, he arrived at a state of comparative calmness. He would be hanged, he said, if he would go right away. No; he would stop in the neighborhood, if only to aggravate the old woman and to see fair play. Would Jack swear to tell him everything that went on, and to talk to Dulcie about him? Jack promised the first part, but averred that he could not run the risk of breaking up the friendly relations of the party by doing what Mrs. Vernon would be sure to disapprove. Alwyne abused Jack's selfishness roundly, and declared his intention of being even with everybody all round some day. Jack ventured to ask whether he would go to lunch with Mrs. Herbert on the morrow, but he replied snappishly that he had no wish to meet Mrs. Chandos, who was just as mercenary and intriguing as her aunt. No, he should go to his sister for the present, and what he would do afterwards he had not yet made up his mind.

When, about half-past ten, Jack went back to the sitting-room, he found his mother there. Her face wore rather a perturbed expression, and had a little unusual tinge of color.

"I thought you would perhaps come in again, my dear," she remarked. "I have something to say to you. I hope," looking wistfully at him, "you will not be vexed."

An uncomfortable instinct came into Jack's breast that he would be vexed, for he knew there was only one subject on which his mother could have anything to say that would be unpleasant to him.

He tried to smile in a gay and unconscious manner.

"What can you possibly have to say that would vex me, mother? Have I not been behaving myself?"

His mother, contrary to her custom, avoided meeting his eyes.

"I heard you say," she began, "that you were going to Cannes to-morrow. I am afraid that you are going to see Mrs. Chandos."

Jack colored: there was a slight stiffness in his tone.

"And if I am, my dear mother," he replied, "I do not quite understand why you should be *afraid*."

"My dear boy," cried Mrs. Chester, with visible agitation, "I cannot bear to pain you, and yet I feel it my duty

to speak. Pray do not resent it: you must know that my anxiety only proceeds from love."

Jack made no answer,—something in his throat choked speech,—and Mrs. Chester, after a moment's pause, went on:

"I cannot help seeing that you have fallen in love with Mrs. Chandos, in the last few days you have changed so much and have looked so harassed; but to-night, when you came from Monte Carlo, you seemed pleased and happy, and were so eager about going to Cannes to-morrow."

"Well, mother,"—Jack's voice trembled a little, but he looked very steadfastly in his mother's eyes,—“and if I do love Mrs. Chandos?”

"It would break my heart if you married her!" cried Mrs. Chester, with strong agitation. "You know that I have no selfish feeling in the matter,—that it is no fear of losing my home that makes me speak. I should be too glad and thankful to see you marry some nice, good girl: I was in hopes you might care for——"

"Do not speak of any one else," interrupted Jack, "but tell me what you object to in Mrs. Chandos."

"I have no doubt she is very clever, very fascinating," poor Mrs. Chester hurried on, "but oh, my dear boy, she is not the wife for you. I must tell you that I have read her books,—I got them in order to see if what I had heard was true,—and they have shocked me beyond words. It is not only the love-verses, which indeed I cannot understand any woman writing, but what horrifies me infinitely more is the utter scepticism she displays. She must be an atheist,—the most awful thing I can imagine. Oh, my dear son, how could you take such a woman to be mistress of your house, mother of your children? Think of a household presided over by a woman who had no religion, no belief in God! think of children brought up no better than the poor heathen! It must be a fearful sin against God to marry such a woman: you would be calling down a terrible judgment on your head by doing so!"

His mother's words pierced Jack's honest heart to the core, for some of these ideas which she enunciated with such passion and fervor had traversed his own brain, although his principles were very much broader and more

liberal than hers. Still, he had been brought up in a religious and somewhat narrow-minded atmosphere, and he had the conviction of most men of the better sort, that a woman ought to have a certain amount of piety and should bring her children up in the love and fear of God. Even men who have outgrown what they think of as the "superstitions necessary to keep the lower classes in order" still think it pleasing and right that women should go to church, say their prayers, and teach their children to do the same. But Jack had not outgrown superstition, and had the most conservative ideas of Church as well as State: therefore his mother's words made due impression upon him, though he endeavored to resist their influence.

"But, mother," he said, "neither you nor any one else can say that Mrs. Chandos is not as refined, as ladylike, as particular in her conversation, as any other woman, even if unfortunately she has listened to the arguments of unprincipled men and is not perhaps—exactly religious. There is not," vehemently, "the least breath against her."

"My dear boy," cried his mother, "do not wilfully shut your eyes to facts! Could any right-minded woman have written that poetry?"

"There is always a certain amount of license permitted to people with poetic imaginations," returned Jack.

"Would you like *your wife* to have written or to write such lines?" persisted his mother. "To my mind, there is something very shocking in any expression of passion—of—the passions of the sexes from a woman."

Jack was silent, because to argue upon such a subject with one's mother, particularly a very religious mother, is next to impossible. Mrs. Chester looked down at the floor, being also embarrassed by the turn the discussion had taken. Jack was the first to speak.

"I think, mother," he said, "you may make your mind perfectly easy. Mrs. Chandos looks upon me and treats me very much as she might do an overgrown Eton boy or an undergraduate, and would probably laugh in my face if I presumed to take the liberty of expressing my feelings for her."

At this Mrs. Chester naturally fired up. "I should think she would feel very much flattered and honored," cried the excellent lady. "And," with an unusual display



of sarcasm, "I should be very sorry if you were to propose to her on the chance of her refusing you."

Like every man who loves, it was intolerable to Jack to hear his idol spoken of slightly. He turned away with an angry gesture, then, recovering himself, said, in an agitated voice, "Forgive me, mother, but I cannot discuss Mrs. Chandos with you."

Mrs. Chester cast an agonized glance at him.

"Are you going to break my heart?" she said.

"I hope no one's heart will be broken," he answered. "As I told you, mother, there is not the very smallest chance of Mrs. Chandos giving me a thought. Good-night." He approached, kissed her cheek with perhaps a shade less of affection than usual, and retreated hastily, whilst the poor lady, fearing to add another word, remained overwhelmed with trouble and anxiety. She felt certain that Jack would propose to Mrs. Chandos the next day, and she was equally sure that dangerous woman would accept him.

Jack, as he sought his own room, was in no happy frame of mind: he had a painful consciousness that Mrs. Chandos was perhaps not the woman whom in cold blood he would have chosen to marry, but his blood was not cold, and he knew that if she but held up a finger to him he would follow wherever it beckoned.

The next morning the young men started after breakfast for Cannes. Jack was to accompany Alwyne to his sister's villa to spend the intervening time between his arrival and the hour at which Mrs. Herbert had invited him to lunch.

Belle evinced great pleasure at seeing them. Her husband had left the night before for Algiers to spend a fortnight with an old brother-soldier. But when she perceived what a very bad frame of mind her brother was in, she began to feel doubtful whether his companionship would be any great boon, and when he went to look at his room, and left her alone with Jack, she hastened to confide her doubts to him.

"My dear Jack," she cried, the instant the door closed upon him, "I foresee a dreadful time. Alwyne is in one of his most detestable moods, and if I have him alone on my hands he will drive me to distraction. I know what



he is when he is crossed in love. His temper is too dreadful: he abuses everybody and everything, or else sits and looks like a skeleton at a feast. My dearest boy, do, for pity's sake, come and stay here for a few days. For once, three will be much better company than two, and if we cannot manage him between us we can at all events fall back upon each other."

A thrill of pleasure shot through Jack's heart as he thought of the delight of being near Mrs. Chandos; but then it occurred to him that he had better wait until after his visit before he accepted, in case he should see the advisability of placing the sea between himself and a hopeless passion.

"I shall be delighted to come if I can," he answered; "but I must leave it open until to-morrow, if you don't mind."

"Nonsense!" returned Mrs. Pierpoint, bent on her plan: "telegraph to your servant to bring your things over to-night. I will write to auntie."

But Jack declared that in any case he must go back to Nice that night, though, if possible, he would return in the morning.

Belle, with her sharp woman's wit, made a very shrewd guess on what her cousin's plans hinged, and devoutly prayed that his visit might prove satisfactory. The day was not one of the typical days of the sunny South. It was gloomy; there was a bitter wind blowing, and dust-storms whirled about in an even more uncomfortable manner than they do in much-abused England. And when Jack arrived at the villa there was a dreadful blow in store for him. Mrs. Herbert greeted him in the kindest, most cordial manner. But then she hastened to say,—

"I have a very sad piece of news for you. Poor dear Reine has a frightful headache and is unable to make her appearance; but I shall do my very best to entertain you, and you must try to put up with my company."

Jack felt an awful sinking at his heart: he could not even muster up courage enough to make the attempt to look cheerful or to say something civil. He was oppressed by the idea that the headache was only a woman's excuse, and that it was Mrs. Chandos's way of intimating to him that his society was unwelcome to her.

Mrs. Herbert divined his thought in an instant, but had too much tact to let him see that she did so.

"It is only a pleasure deferred," she said, brightly. "In a day or two you must come over again, if you will, and the original programme shall be carried out."

During luncheon Mrs. Herbert was so bright and cheery that Jack's drooping spirits began to revive. She seemed to take it as a matter of course that they were to see a good deal of him at the villa, and he found courage to tell her that Mrs. Pierpoint wished him to spend a few days with her.

"I am so glad," Mrs. Herbert said. "I hope you will, and that we shall see you very often. We are two lonely women, and we pretend to like solitude and to be unsociable, but I really believe that we are very glad now and then to be invaded by cheerful people from the outer world. It may be all very well for an elderly invalid like myself," she added, smiling, "but it is not right for a charming young woman like Reine."

Jack, whose spirits were reviving, wished politely to protest against her reference to herself, but she made a little gesture with her hand.

"I have no youth and no illusions left," she said, cheerfully. "Please take me at my own estimate, and do not think it necessary to make civil little disclaimers when I refer to my age. You see, it gives a woman so much more freedom and license when it is once understood that she has no longer any youthful aspirations and is to be treated as a friendly and benevolent godmother. I have several godsons and god-daughters, and am always ready to add to their number."

This was a kind way of intimating to Jack that she took a friendly interest in him; and he recognized the intention, and began to think his hostess a very delightful person.

"We had proposed," she said, when luncheon was over, "to take you for a drive this afternoon; but I dare not venture out on such a day: so we will go into the *salon* and have our coffee and a chat, and as soon as you begin to get bored you shall make any pretext you like, or none at all, and run away."

"And now," said Mrs. Herbert, when they were in-

stalled by the fire in two comfortable chairs, and the servant who brought the coffee had departed, "we can talk at our ease. I have a theory that it is wrong to make personal remarks before servants; and yet it is so much more interesting to talk about people than things."

Then she drew him on to speak about his cousins, his little invalid sister, his own interests and pursuits, then, very gradually, to the subject of Reine. She adroitly ignored his feelings for her friend, and spoke of her as though she wished to call his attention to the charms of a person whom he did not perhaps sufficiently appreciate. Jack listened with eagerness, with a glowing heart: he began to feel as if he had known Mrs. Herbert all his life, instead of having only met her yesterday for the first time.

"There is no one," Mrs. Herbert said, "who has been more misunderstood than Reine. It is perhaps her own fault a little; and yet, though I do not think she willingly gives false impressions, she does not try to avoid doing so, or to correct them when once they are made. The real Reine is the most kind-hearted, lovable, affectionate creature in the world."

"I am sure of it," exclaimed Jack, with a warmth which would have betrayed him even if his feelings had been a secret until now.

"Perhaps," Mrs. Herbert continued, reflectively, without giving any sign of having noticed his enthusiasm, "perhaps you do not know by experience how wrong things are apt to go in this world, and that many people, women especially, are doomed to contend with the very trials which are most painful to them and cause them the greatest suffering. Now, if Reine, with her impulsive nature, had married a man who was at all suited to her, she might have been one of the happiest women in the world; and certainly no woman could have been better calculated to make a man happy."

Jack devoured Mrs. Herbert with his eyes, as though imploring further confidences.

She had every intention of confiding in him, for she had made up her mind about him and had taken a very shrewd diagnosis of his character. He was true; he was to be trusted; he was devoted to Reine, and he was not in the



very least likely to repeat what she said. Not that she intended to make any indiscreet revelations to him: there was nothing in Reine's life that a man who loved her would not love her the better for hearing,—nothing but what would increase the chivalrous feeling of a good man and intensify his desire to love and to protect her. Mrs. Herbert made no apology for confiding in Jack, but now rather assumed the air and manner of one who talks to a common friend of some person whom both love. She was an excellent talker, and could tell a story with a smoothness and consecutiveness which few people are gifted with. Probably if Reine had been aware that her friend was beguiling Sir John Chester with her biography she would have been very angry; but the blessing that we ought to be most thankful for in this life—ignorance of what is said of us in our absence—was vouchsafed to her, and, little dreaming of the deeply-interesting *tête-à-tête* that was going on down-stairs, she was hoping that poor dear Mia was not being too dreadfully bored.

Poor dear Mia, however, was very far from being bored. She had taken an immense fancy to Jack; she had made up her mind that he was the very man to make Reine happy, and she already intended to assist him by every means in her power, being perfectly aware at the same time that she would have to be very clever and cunning to conceal her designs from that acute lady. As for Jack, I leave the reader to conjecture what his feelings were as he listened to and talked of the one subject that engrossed his soul.

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## CHAPTER XV.

"If her mother had been alive, Reine would never have married that wretch," said Mrs. Herbert, with vindictive energy. "The worst misfortune that ever happened to the poor dear child was the death of Mrs. Chandos. She was a charming woman, and she and Reine were devoted to each other."

"Mrs. Chandos, I suppose, was Mrs. Vernon's sister?" ventured Jack.



"Yes; but I do not think they were at all alike. I knew Mrs. Chandos well, but my acquaintance with Mrs. Vernon is only slight. She seems a thorough woman of the world, and a much more decided person than her sister, who was very gentle, very yielding, easily trampled on. From what I have seen of Mrs. Vernon," smiling, "I do not think it would be easy to trample on her."

"No indeed," smiled Jack, in response.

"When a woman is soft and gentle," observed Mrs. Herbert, "a man—that is, a husband—frequently takes the opportunity of oppressing her."

"Really!" uttered Jack. "I'm afraid I don't know much about these things."

"On the other hand," continued Mrs. Herbert, lightly, "if the husband is weak and easy-going, he is tolerably sure to be ruled with a high hand by his wife."

"I suppose," remarked Jack, doubtfully, "that opposite natures were intended to come together."

"To the great detriment of the next generation," said Mrs. Herbert. "Reine and I have a theory that the cause of most of our mental suffering is the opposing influences of the two separate natures and wills that we inherit from our two parents struggling within us. However," with a light laugh, seeking Jack's look of perplexity, "I am not going to bore you with our theories (we have a good many between us); at all events, not now. They shall be kept for another day. I did not like Colonel Chandos at all. He could, and did, make himself very agreeable in society, but was extremely despotic, arrogant, and ill-tempered at home. Reine inherited something of his fiery spirit as well as her mother's kind heart and sweet nature, and she resented his behavior, and would have shown her resentment but for her mother's entreaties. The two were all in all to each other, and then, as misfortune would have it, Mrs. Chandos died from the effects of an accident when Reine was just seventeen, and, poor dear child! her heart was all but broken. For some months she stayed with me, then she went to her aunt, Mrs. Vernon, and finally it was decided that she was to return to her father to pre-side over his house. This did not answer particularly well: he was tyrannical and disagreeable, and she resented his treatment of her, and now there was no mother to

stand between them. It was just at the time when she felt most unhappy and unsettled at home that she met Captain Bernard, who fell desperately in love with her. I believe—I hope I do not do him injustice—that Colonel Chandos knew that he had led anything but a reputable life, and that he drank; but he was rich and heir-presumptive to a barony, so the colonel, being rather anxious to break up his establishment and enjoy more freedom for himself, put no obstacle in the way. Reine was always imaginative and romantically inclined, poor dear child, so she proceeded to idealize her lover, and to throw a halo of her own creating round him, and, as he was very careful to keep his bad habits in the background, she imagined him a sort of hero, and looked forward to the happiness that only exists in story-books.”

Jack gazed earnestly at his companion.

“You seem to take a very bad view of life,” he said. “Do you really think there is no happiness in it?”

“I think there is plenty of happiness for people with good health and good digestions,” answered Mrs. Herbert, with something between a smile and a sigh. “I think there is physical happiness and enjoyment, but that is for those who do not look much beyond the physical; but for people troubled with great ideas and imaginations I believe there is a good deal more misery than happiness. Young ladies who write poetry and look at the stars and dream of knights and heroes are apt to suffer very rude revulsions of feeling when they come in contact with the hard and prosaic realities of life.”

“But,” said Jack, with some warmth, “every man does not turn out a drunken blackguard; and if a beautiful girl married a—a decently good sort of fellow who was devoted to her, even if he did not come up to her imagination, I suppose there might be a chance of his making her tolerably happy.”

“Of course there is every chance,” Mrs. Herbert answered. “If Reine had married some nice, kind man who loved her, I believe she would have been a comparatively happy woman. She would have come down from the skies and found the earth quite habitable. I feel sure that under some circumstances she might still be happy. I told her so only last night.”

"And what did she say?" asked Jack, eagerly.

"She poo-pooed the idea, of course. But I do not despair."

Jack looked ardently at Mrs. Herbert as though he were dying to say something, but she hurried on with her story:

"Well, Reine married, and for a month everything went smoothly. Captain Bernard put a patent-leather boot on his cloven foot until unfortunately he met an old boon-companion whom he invited to dinner. When they joined Reine in the drawing-room, she was painfully impressed by something in her husband's demeanor, and retired early. The pair adjourned down-stairs, and Captain Bernard, when he again joined his wife, was hopelessly drunk. There was a scene next morning: she threatened to leave him: he promised reformation; but after that his lapses from sobriety became frequent. Reine fled to her father, who declined to receive her, and told her bluntly that she must make the best of things, and she had no choice but to return to her wretched home for a time. Her love had turned to loathing and contempt; her husband, incensed by her coldness and disgust, began to hate her; he left her and consorted openly with disreputable people, and one night he threw a decanter at her which struck her head and caused her nearly to bleed to death. A doctor was sent for: the butler and footmen saw her fainting on the floor: there was no lack of evidence of his cruelty."

Jack's face was rigid; his teeth were clinched. Mrs. Herbert purposely avoided looking at him.

"I was abroad at the time. She went to Mrs. Vernon when she was able to be moved, and as soon as possible a divorce was obtained. When she joined me some months later in Italy, I think I never saw so heart-broken a woman. She would not go anywhere in public nor see any one: she had a morbid idea that she was irretrievably disgraced. She was subject to the most violent outbursts of despair and grief; her nerves were shattered, and I was at my wits' end to know what to do with her. It was then that—unfortunately, as I cannot help thinking—she met Henry Bertram. He took an immense interest in and gained an enormous influence over her. She had been



religiously brought up by her mother, and her mind was then tormented by the impossibility of reconciling omnipotence and universal benevolence in the Divine Being. Suffering had weakened her faith, and she revolted from what she considered the intolerable injustice of human life and the cruelty of unmerited suffering. Henry Bertram is a robust unbeliever, perfectly happy without a faith or creed of any kind except the creed of personal probity and honor, and he, not in the least comprehending the difference of fibre between his strong resolute nature and the delicate, nervous, imaginative, dependent organization of a woman or rather a girl like Reine, thought the kindest thing he could do for her was to convince her that the religion in which she had been brought up was a sham and a delusion, and that as soon as she cast off its shackles and ceased to torment herself with vain speculations, accepted realities and made the best of life from his pagan point of view, she would be an infinitely happier, more contented woman. And, perhaps, if he could have changed her life to one full of interests like his own and closed her brain to thought, his remedy might have answered, instead of depriving her of what little comfort she had and taking away her sole main-stay."

"He must be a thundering blackguard," uttered Jack, between his teeth.

"My dear Sir John," answered Mrs. Herbert, looking up at him with a smile, "you could not have applied more unjust or untrue epithets to Mr. Bertram. I know that in the tract-books of one's youth an unbeliever was always painted in appallingly black hues: he was bound to be a drunkard, a murderer, a villain of the deepest dye; and it is almost shocking to one's pet theories to know that so many atheists, agnostics, or whatever they are called, are really excellent people. Henry Bertram is the soul of honor; he is the kindest, the most benevolent creature in the world: he has discovered, he says, that good is good for its own sake; that it is far better to be upright and just from conviction and inclination than from fear of consequences; that whether there be a future or not (about which he gives no opinion, though he sees no probability of it nor has any desire for it), it must make the greatest difference in this life both to ourselves and



our neighbors whether we act rightly, kindly, unselfishly ; that it is irrational to be always thinking about what is to happen in another world, instead of minding our business and doing our best in this, which is at all events a certainty as long as it lasts."

Jack felt a keen sense of disappointment as he listened to this description of the man whom it had pleased him to think of as the evil genius of Mrs. Chandos.

He was not inclined to take him at Mrs. Herbert's estimate, she, no doubt, being biassed by a personal partiality ; for Jack still held the view which his interlocutor smilingly derided, that a man who believed in nothing must be a scoundrel and a villain. He felt that he would rather not discuss Bertram : so he asked, after a moment's pause, what had become of Captain Bernard.

"He is drinking himself to death," returned Mrs. Herbert, "but, having a fine constitution, he takes a considerable time about it. I shall be glad," she continued, calmly, "when he is dead, for then I think perhaps Reine might be induced to marry. I fancy she would hardly consider it right or feel quite comfortable about it as long as he lives."

Jack had been nerving himself to ask a question. Mrs. Herbert's manner was so kind and confidential that it emboldened him to commit what he strongly suspected was an indiscretion, if not an impertinence. He turned uneasily in his chair, the color deepened in his cheek, and then he said, with an effort, and stammering a little,—

"Would it be taking a very great liberty if I asked you a question? If you think it one, please don't answer me or—or take any notice of it. But—but Mrs. Chandos's poetry would make me think that she had—had cared very much about somebody——"

"It does seem very wonderful to think," answered Mrs. Herbert, smiling, "that all those very pretty and rather—well, if I must say it—ardent verses were inspired by idealization of a drunken brute like her husband, for I assure you as a positive fact that Reine has never shown any sign of caring for any one else. She has a very poetic and imaginative nature, and you know it is quite possible for minds like hers to imagine and describe all sorts of things they have not experienced. I have often been

quite amused to hear Reine discussed by people who knew nothing of her and simply judged her from her verses: sometimes, however, I have been very angry, for the most unjust and false judgments have been formed of her. Because she writes of love, the world pictures her surrounded by lovers: they credit her with being her own heroine and bestowing on various favored lovers the warmth of feeling which she describes. There is not in this world a more innocent or virtuous woman than Reine, and no one has been more surprised than I have at the passionate utterances which she has occasionally given forth in verse. I am tempted sometimes to wish she had never written a line; for, though it has given her a considerable reputation and made her much sought after, I think it has laid her open to very grave misinterpretation."

A load seemed to be lifted from Jack's heart.

"I can quite imagine what you say to be the case," he said, warmly; "but yet it is very natural to think that when people write about a subject they are expressing their own feelings and—and experiences."

"That is where ordinary mortals make such tremendous mistakes. They cannot allow for the power of imagination. I can, for I also am imaginative. If I were to shut my eyes and you were to describe to me something that I had never seen or heard of, it would all be as plain to my mind's eye as if I had witnessed it myself. And any one who, like Reine, is at the same time strongly imaginative and sympathetic, lives in a world of his own, and sees visions and dreams dreams so strangely like realities that commonplace people would decline to believe that the seer had not taken actual part in them."

Jack was emboldened by Mrs. Herbert's frankness to say something of a still more leading nature.

"It is so awfully kind of you to treat me and to talk to me in the way you have done," he said, looking eagerly and gratefully at her. "I—I dare say you have seen how much I—I admire Mrs. Chandos. I have never met any one who, I think, could hold a candle to her. Might I ask you a question?" imploringly.

"A dozen," replied Mrs. Herbert, kindly.

It was a minute or two before Jack could muster resolution to drag out his next question.

"Do I bore Mrs. Chandos? Is that why she has kept out of the way to-day?"

Mrs. Herbert smiled reassuringly.

"No, indeed," she answered. "I give you my word, her headache is a sad reality. She is suffering torments. Why, last night she and I were making all sorts of plans for your entertainment to-day."

Again Jack felt a load taken from his heart.

"Of course," he said, humbly, "I know it is great presumption on my part to think of her at all. I cannot hope to interest her in the very least; but——"

He looked down at the floor, and left his sentence unfinished.

Mrs. Herbert took pity upon him and gave him a little gentle encouragement.

"It is always a mistake," she said, smiling, "for a man to undervalue himself. Do not be too humble: the woman whom you wish to win never thinks any the more favorably of you for it. You should be friendly and pleasant, and endeavor to amuse her. If you look melancholy, as men not sure of their position frequently do, you will bore her, and that will be fatal. I take quite a friendly interest in you, and, if I can help you, I will. But you must be guided by me."

Jack made all sorts of protestations of gratitude. In the midst of them the door opened, and Mrs. Chandos, looking pale and languid, but, as Jack thought, more beautiful than ever, came in.

"Why, my love," cried Mrs. Herbert, rising to meet her, "this is an agreeable surprise. You are better, I am sure, or you would not be here."

"Yes," answered Reine, "I am much better." And she greeted Jack kindly.

Mrs. Herbert insisted on installing her on the sofa and making all sorts of little arrangements for her comfort, in which she called on Jack to assist her.

He felt as though sunshine had suddenly broken through the gray afternoon, and his face beamed with pleasure. It was so delightful to know that she had not purposely avoided him,—nay, that she had made an effort to come down and see him. It was as well, poor fellow, that he did not know the real nature of the effort. Reine had



thought her friend would be so bored by his prolonged visit that she had come to relieve her from her task of entertaining him. When Mrs. Herbert made some pretext to leave the room, Reine did not attempt to hinder her, thinking she had well earned this respite.

But she was agreeably surprised presently to find that Sir John was not boring her. He told her about Alwyne's banishment and despair, and Reine grew so interested that she almost forgot her headache. Then she drew him on to talk of his sister and his own pursuits, and Jack, giving heed to Mrs. Herbert's recent advice, did his utmost to amuse and interest her. When that discreet lady returned, thinking it wiser not to give Reine time to get weary, she found them on excellent terms. She rang for tea, and the three chatted away until Jack, with deep reluctance, and only yielding to a strong sense of the impropriety of inflicting his company any longer on his hostesses, rose to take leave. He was coming the next day, he told them, to stay with Mrs. Pierpoint, and both pressed him very cordially to come again soon.

How light his heart was as he left the villa! how different his sensations from those he had suffered after his last leave-taking there!

"My dear Jack," cried Belle, as he entered his cousin's drawing-room, "do, for heaven's sake, tell me that you have made up your mind to stop with me for a few days! If you don't, I shall be in a lunatic asylum soon and Alwyne will probably have committed suicide. I never knew him take anything so badly; and that is saying a great deal. I suppose he really is in love this time. Tell me, what extraordinary fascination is there about this girl?"

"Only the fascination that every woman has for the man who is in love with her, my dear, as far as I know. She has none for me, except that she is a nice, pretty, ladylike girl. Yes, I shall be very glad to come and help you entertain him, poor chap! But I don't think it will be a very easy task."

Alwyne was at that moment cogitating in his own room. His one idea was how he was going to communicate with Dulcie and to see her without her mother's knowledge. If Jack were worth a straw, he reflected, angrily, he



could so easily help him: it was all very fine to talk about honor where your own feelings were not interested; but never mind! he would do without him. And Alwyne mused and mused until he had concocted a plan for circumventing Mrs. Vernon that he hoped would be quite successful.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

THE four ladies, left at Nice without their cavaliers, were all more or less depressed and out of sorts.

Dulcie was wretched at having lost her handsome and devoted admirer, Mrs. Vernon was perplexed and worried beyond measure at the new complication, Mrs. Chester was miserable at the thought of her dear son being exposed to the dangerous seductions of Mrs. Chandos, and Lilah was irritable and vexed at the absence of her brother. The first three exerted becoming efforts to conceal their feelings, but Lilah made no such attempt, her ill health being always a sufficient excuse when she chose to be cross and peevish.

Dulcie was beginning to conceive a sullen dislike to poor Noel and to consider that he had shamefully entrapped and deceived her. The prospect of going out to India as the wife of a poor soldier no longer had any charms for her; indeed, she thought it detestable, now that she would have had the opportunity, but for her unfortunate marriage, of being a rich and considered woman in her own country. And Alwyne's imperious, determined nature was eminently adapted to control her weak and wavering one and to impress her with respect and admiration. She blamed everything and every one but herself for the misfortune which had befallen her: she even said to herself that it was her mother's fault for preventing her from seeing Noel and by so doing making her think ten times more of him than she would otherwise have done.

It was the afternoon following Alwyne's departure when one of the chambermaids tapped at her door, and, with a mysterious air, handed her a note which she said

she had been bidden to deliver to mademoiselle when she was alone.

Dulcie blushed vividly as she took the envelope from the woman's hand, though she tried to assume a careless and natural manner. She waited until she was alone, and then, with a beating heart, broke the seal. It was, as she guessed, from Alwyne, and was couched in the most passionate and despairing terms. He wrote of his unbearable misery, the absolute impossibility of enduring life under such intolerable circumstances, and he conjured her to grant him a meeting. He suggested that the following day she should feign a headache and declare herself too ill to go down to dinner, and then, when her mother was out of the way, steal out and meet him in the garden.

Dulcie's mind was a prey to all sorts of conflicting feelings,—her desire to see Alwyne, the recollection that in doing so she was committing almost a crime, fear, excitement, doubt: her brain whirled as these conflicting emotions chased each other through it. If she could only have had some one to help or advise her! but she was afraid to trust Morton now, and, of all things, shrank from letting the maid know that the hated marriage was valid. But the desire to see Alwyne again was paramount, and triumphed even over her fears, and she presently indited a few lines to him, saying that she would try to meet him on the morrow as he wished, but that it would be only to say "good-by" and must be for the last time.

She confided the letter to the chambermaid, and then joined her mother in the sitting-room with a serene and unconscious face. Her affair with Noel having given her considerable training in deceit, it now came tolerably easy to her, and she was not visited by any very severe qualms of remorse, as a girl of strong feelings might have been. She did not mean any harm: on the contrary, she meant to tell him that he must not write to her or try to see her at present. If he was so miserable about her, it was only fair just to see him and bestow what consolation she could upon him. Besides this, there was a strong secret desire in her heart not to lose him: even without acknowledging it to herself, she clung to the hope that something—she did not say death—might free her from her hated bond. And then she might marry Alwyne, the

most delightful fate imaginable, and she would get away from her mother, whom she no longer loved, but merely dreaded.

When Mrs. Vernon saw her daughter so apparently cheerful and unconcerned, she did not suspect her of any fresh duplicity, but only reflected wonderingly on her extraordinary insensibility. Strong-willed and resolute people are unsuspicious, as a rule. They attack their desires in a straightforward manner, and try to carry them by a *coup de main*. If they are disappointed and thwarted, they show their feelings openly, rarely attempting disguise; and they are exceedingly prone to take it for granted that other people's looks and actions are equally natural and spontaneous. Having dealt a crushing blow on Dulcie by assuring her of the validity of her marriage, she was not in the least prepared for the young lady's continuing to encourage Mr. Temple's suit.

Whilst despising Dulcie in her heart for the weakness, poverty, insensibility of her nature, she still thought it matter for congratulation that the girl had so little feeling.

The next day after luncheon Dulcie complained of headache. During their afternoon drive she assumed a languid air, and on returning home went at once to lie down. She made Morton darken the room; she submitted to the operation of having her brow bathed with eau-de-cologne and water; she even went so far as to take the remedies which her mother prescribed. And, as the dinner-hour approached, she asked, in a faint voice, to be left alone to sleep. She refused to allow Morton to sit in the room with her, and begged that she might not be disturbed until she rang her bell, when the chambermaid would tell Morton.

It was a great relief to Dulcie when she was left alone, for she was in such a fever of excitement and terror at the bold action she plotted that it was only by an extraordinary exertion of self-command that she remained motionless in her recumbent position. The instant she was alone, she started up, locked the door, dressed herself in her darkest clothes, looked out the thickest veil she possessed, and waited with what patience she might until she heard the summons to the *table-d'hôte*. She delayed



another ten minutes to give every one time to assemble in the dining-room; then, tying on her veil and another over it, she peeped cautiously from her door, and, having assured herself that there was no one about, hurried along the corridor, descended a side staircase, and made her way out of the house by a back door. In two minutes more she and Alwyne were together,—he pouring out all sorts of passionate exclamations of love, she listening, half enchanted, half terrified. It was in vain she tried to tell him that she had only come to wish him good-by for the last time; that he must not try to see her or write to her any more for the present: his vehemence bore down all her remonstrances and protestations as the current bears a straw on its bosom. He could not live without her; he would shoot himself if this sort of thing went on; if she would only trust to him and do as he told her, he would arrange their meetings and correspondence, and they would between them manage to outwit her mother. He urged her passionately over and over again to tell him what the obstacle to their love was, and pressed upon her the suggestion that there was some other suitor whom her mother thought more eligible. Dulcie found it the easier plan to allow him to assume that this suspicion was correct.

Time sped on with that incredible swiftness which he only employs during the meetings of lovers, and Dulcie, who in her calculations had arranged that she must not be absent from the hotel more than twenty minutes, found to her horror, when she looked at her watch, that nearly forty had elapsed. She was terrified: the *table-d'hôte* would be over; she would meet some of the hotel guests in the passages or on the stairs, and they would infallibly recognize her. What should she do? She tore herself from Alwyne's embrace and fled back to the hotel, crept cautiously in at the door, got up-stairs without meeting any one except a waiter and a chambermaid, turned into her own corridor with a sensation of intense relief, opened her door, and—found herself face to face with her mother.

For a full minute—an awful minute, pregnant with horror—not a word was uttered by either. Dulcie felt she was lost. Mrs. Vernon had realized the situation and decided upon action.



When she spoke, there was a terrible calmness in her voice.

"You have been to meet Mr. Temple?"

No response from Dulcie.

"Knowing that you are the wife of another man. Perhaps you are contemplating an elopement with him. The punishment for bigamy is imprisonment."

Dulcie stood trembling like a leaf, looking away from her mother. Mrs. Vernon was in a state of intense exasperation, but her tone was cold and incisive.

"I see," she continued, "that if you remain with me you will end by bringing some terrible disgrace upon me. I have no longer any control over you, and deceit is a thing with which I cannot pretend to cope. I now look upon the accident which happened to your husband on your wedding-day as a very great misfortune for me. But for that, I should be relieved of all responsibility about you, and you would probably be on your way to India. I intend to start for England the day after to-morrow, and the moment that your husband is well enough to undertake the care of you I shall hand you over to him. Of two evils one must choose the least, and though your extraordinary story may give rise to some gossip, still I feel it is better to let the world talk about that than about some still more disgraceful situation into which you may possibly get yourself. For my own part, I shall endeavor to forget the past and the affection and interest which I have always felt for you: indeed, I shall be thankful to be relieved from the frightful responsibility of looking after a girl who has neither self-respect nor, apparently, any sense of right and wrong. If, between this time and the day you go to your husband, I find you holding correspondence of any kind with Mr. Temple, I shall write and tell him the truth."

Mrs. Vernon's words had their full effect. Dulcie was terrified nearly to death. She sobbed and cried, implored and entreated, promised anything in the world if only her mother would not forsake her and give her up to Noel. For now the weak girl was persuaded that all her heart was given to Alwyne, and the thought of Noel was hateful to her.

The sight of her distress did not touch one chord of pity

in her mother's heart: she felt nothing but boundless contempt for her. She was satisfied with the excellent result of her threats, about which she was half in earnest. She argued seriously to herself that Dulcie's extraordinary weakness and apparent obliviousness to right and wrong might lead her into some very serious predicament, and she told herself, besides, that, as the girl was really married to Noel and the marriage could not be undone, the only thing was to make the best of it and let it be announced to the world as soon as possible. Her own ambition on Dulcie's behalf was crushed forever: all she could now hope was to make her own life as pleasant and agreeable as possible. Dulcie in India would be very much like Dulcie dead: the affection which she had entertained for her only child had dwindled away to nothing: indeed, the girl's companionship had become irksome and the responsibility for her caprices harassing in the extreme.

If, three months earlier, any one had told her that her feeling for her daughter could undergo such a change, she would not have believed it; but Dulcie's behavior had caused her such poignant disappointment and annoyance that, not having the blind mother's love which no ill conduct on the part of a child can alienate, she had grown to look upon her with a degree of coldness, anger, and distrust which swamped all warmer feeling.

Dulcie's tears and distress did not move her: she took a revengeful pleasure in terrifying her and in seeing her suffer. Why should she be sorry for a girl who had been absolutely indifferent to her feelings?

"You have brought all this on yourself," she said, un pityingly, "and must take the consequences. I cannot help you: you have put yourself beyond the power of any one to help you. I have brought you up with the utmost care; you have been guarded and shielded from harm, you have never been left to the care of strangers or hirelings, never had an anxiety or trouble; and yet the very first time when, for your own sake, I thwart you,—when, for your own sake (for how can it personally affect me whether you are comfortable or uncomfortable, happy or unhappy?), I refuse to allow you to see more of a penniless man without recommendation of any sort,—you at once fly to deceit, and, with the most extraordinary folly and

obstinacy, take a step which is to ruin your whole future. You thought you were in love with Mr. Trevor, and here, you see, less than two months after you have married him and by doing so cut yourself off from all other men, you fall in love again, and this time with a man whom I would gladly have received and welcomed, and who would have been an excellent match."

Dulcie buried her face in her hands in an agony of self-abasement and misery. Each word of her mother's cut her to the heart.

"Even now," proceeded Mrs. Vernon, with unrelaxed severity, "I do not think you realize your position. Are you aware that in listening to Mr. Temple's professions of love, and perhaps permitting his embraces (for I have so little opinion of you that I think even this quite possible), you are committing a positive crime? If your husband ever hears of this, what do you suppose he will think of it? No doubt he imagines you to be devoted to him; and how would he like to know that, when he is lying at death's door, you are stealing out at night to meet another man?"

By this time Dulcie was in hysterics, and her mother thought it expedient to discontinue the infliction of the moral kourbash. She proceeded to leave the room, saying, somewhat unfeelingly,—

"You had better control yourself, or you will have people coming to see what is the matter. I shall return when you are more composed, and will then tell you my plans."

Mrs. Vernon went back to the sitting-room a prey to feelings of the most unpleasant kind. Until the last day or two, when Alwyne's suit had taken her so disagreeably by surprise, she had really been enjoying the life at Nice when she could get away from the dreadful thought of Dulcie's marriage. The sunshine and beautiful scenery, the companionship of her old friend Mrs. Chester, and of other pleasant acquaintances, had made life extremely agreeable, and she had been in part able to lay aside the haunting dread of the future. She was willing to wait calmly for events without going to meet misfortune. It was obvious now that she must leave Nice and get Dulcie away from Alwyne's influence; and she came to the con-



clusion that the best plan would be to return to London. As to travelling about alone with her daughter, the idea was intolerable; and now Mrs. Vernon was really of opinion that the sooner Dulcie was re-married and handed to her husband the better. She had fled from England to be out of Noel's way; now she was about to return in order to seek him. Such is the irony of Fate!

But what excuse was she to make to Mrs. Chester for leaving Nice? No allusion had been made by either of the ladies to Alwyne's suit or his sudden departure, though Mrs. Vernon did not for a moment doubt that her friend was aware of the former and its connection with the latter. It would be better to avoid the awkwardness that a reference to the truth might occasion, and to invent some plausible excuse.

She would say that her father, who was a very old man, was in such a precarious state of health that she felt it her duty to go to him at once, as she had received a report which occasioned her great anxiety. The next morning she would telegraph her intended return to Mr. Benson and the butler, and the day following they would leave Nice and travel straight through to England.

Mrs. Vernon arranged all her plans with care, and, when they were quite settled, went back to her daughter's room.

Dulcie was lying limp and exhausted on the bed, incapable of remonstrance or resistance to her mother's will. Mrs. Vernon, in a quiet, decided voice, informed her of her plans and of the reason which she intended to give to Mrs. Chester and their other acquaintances for their sudden departure.

Dulcie did not respond by a single word.

Mrs. Vernon, on leaving her, sent for Morton, and, to the maid's bitter disappointment, told her that she would have to pack up on the morrow, and assigned the same reason for returning to London that she proposed to give to every one else.

Morton could have cried: she had never enjoyed anything so much in her life as this sojourn in the Nice hotel, where there was as much gayety below-stairs as above, and where she mixed with the most delightful company of valets and ladies' maids, was invited to soirées and

dances, played cards, and heard the most interesting and scandalous gossip about all the families in the place who were fortunate enough to be represented by domestics.

But she could not remonstrate with her lady against thus arbitrarily cutting her off from her new-found joys and pleasures: she could only exhibit her chagrin in her face and manner, of which, naturally, Mrs. Vernon took not the smallest notice.

Having laid her commands on Morton, Mrs. Vernon sought Mrs. Chester, and, in the most natural manner in the world, confided to her that she had received news of an alarming character about her father's health and felt it her duty to return at once to England. Mrs. Chester, the most truthful and unsuspecting woman living, believed implicitly what her friend told her, and sympathized in the warmest and most sincere manner with the afflicted daughter. She deeply regretted the departure of Mrs. Vernon and Dulcie, to both of whom she had become much attached. They had made her stay at Nice much pleasanter than it would otherwise have been; and she extracted a promise from Mrs. Vernon to go and visit her in the summer or autumn.

Mrs. Chester sat ruminating very sorrowfully after her friend left her. She was shy and retiring, not at all given to making acquaintances, and she scarcely knew any one in the hotel or the place with whom she would care to associate when Mrs. Vernon and Dulcie left. And she thought sadly how the little castle had been thrown down which she had built for the habitation of her son and Dulcie,—that dear, good, innocent girl, who would have made him such a charming wife. And he was now, as, alas! there could be no doubt, under the pernicious influence of the dangerous siren at Cannes, who had cast a glamour over him which, as his mother believed, had never been cast by any woman before. What, ah! what was to be the end of it?

## CHAPTER XVII

It was the end of May. Dulcie and her mother were entering into the festivities of the season, and leading exactly the same sort of life as they would have done had the untoward event of the previous November never happened. Noel had made no sign: they were ignorant of his fate, his whereabouts, of everything that concerned him. Now and then the remembrance of him came across both mother and daughter as a sort of nightmare, but, by common consent, no mention was ever made of him.

Never had Dulcie received so much attention. Fate, with the irony in which she delights, brought several advantageous suitors to her feet,—suitors whom a year ago Mrs. Vernon would have welcomed with delight. The frigid reception which they met at the hands of both mother and daughter seemed to increase their ardor. Mrs. Vernon was forced by circumstances to turn a deaf ear and cold glances upon men whom she would have gladly smiled at, and Dulcie was terrified now at the approach of any man with words of love and admiration on his lips. For Alwyne was the real possessor of her heart, and, although she had not seen him since that dreadful evening at Nice, she had determined in her foolish head that he was the only man she ever could or would love, and, as it was impossible she could marry at all, she would never place herself again in the terrible predicament in which that affair with Alwyne had landed her.

She went to balls, parties, and plays, she danced, she smiled, she talked pleasantly enough; but the moment any admirer showed symptoms of tenderness or undue attraction she froze at once, and, contrary to the old axiom, the more fire he showed, the less disposition the young lady evinced to him. Once or twice Mrs. Vernon had earnestly discussed her daughter's affairs with Mr. Benson. He recommended her to wait until Mr. Trevor took the initiative. There was no question in his own mind that the young man's head had been affected by the injury: he might even have forgotten the fact of the marriage, or his



health might still be in such a condition that he felt it expedient to wait until he was stronger before he made the necessary overtures and explanations which would now be indispensable to the recovery of his wife. It was quite possible, Mr. Benson suggested, that he had been warned against any excitement and that he feared the consequences of a meeting with Mrs. Vernon. He must be convinced ere this, by Dulcie's having made no attempt to see or communicate with him, that his hold over her was not so strong as her mother's. He saw nothing for it but to wait. To seek out the young man and, if he was still an invalid, as there could be no doubt he was, to put it into his head to claim his wife would be a most unwise proceeding.

Mrs. Vernon had resumed friendly relations with Dulcie. After their return to London she had felt the utter impossibility of their living together on bad terms: so making an immense effort over herself, she pretended to ignore all the unpleasantness which had gone before, and to take up life from the morning before Dulcie had sallied forth to commit that fatal, irretrievable action which she imagined was to lead her straight to the "happy ever after" point. As this would have been almost impossible had they remained *tête-à-tête*, Mrs. Vernon invited friends to stay with them: so that for some months now there had nearly always been a third person whose presence made the amenities of life necessary and comparatively easy. At the present moment the, in this case, welcome third was a cousin of Mrs. Vernon's, a widow of middle age, childless, prepossessing in face and manner, good-tempered, and fairly well-off. Dulcie was fond of her, and she, Mrs. Leslie, entirely reciprocated the affection. She liked the society of young people better than that of women of her own age. Mrs. Vernon, who was suffering slight inconvenience at this time from a strain of a sinew, was glad that Mrs. Leslie should relieve her occasionally from the duties of chaperonage and take Dulcie to balls and other entertainments which necessitated standing about.

Mrs. Leslie loved society, and was disposed for all sorts of amusement. She particularly liked walking in the Row in the morning, and had no difficulty in persuading her pretty cousin to accompany her. Mother and daugh-

ter had kept their own counsel well, and Mrs. Leslie had not the faintest suspicion of the exciting romance of which the quiet and modest Dulcie had been the heroine a few months before.

This fine May morning Mrs. Leslie and Dulcie, as usual, wended their way to the Park, and took chairs placed with their backs to the railings and commanding a view of all who passed down the Row. A friend of Mrs. Leslie's came up, greeted her with warmth, and asked permission to take the vacant chair beside her. It was at this moment, when her cousin's attention was quite absorbed, that Dulcie, looking to her right, beheld within a few paces of her the handsome face and figure of Alwyne Temple. The blood rushed tumultuously to her cheeks; at that instant he caught sight of her, and a look of delight beamed in his eyes. In another moment, having assured himself that Mrs. Vernon was not of the party, he had quietly taken the seat beside Dulcie and was pressing her hand.

"Is it safe to speak to you?" he whispered, with a glance at Mrs. Leslie's averted head; and Dulcie made a sign in the affirmative.

"My own darling! how delighted I am to see you once more!" he murmured. "If you knew how wretched I have been all this time! Tell me, is your mother still dead against me, or has the mysterious obstacle been removed?"

At this question, fraught with horror to Dulcie, the crimson, which had been waning in her cheeks, flowed in full tide over them again. She shook her head and looked utterly miserable: the delight which she had felt at sight of Alwyne was swallowed up in the dreadful remembrance of Noel.

Mrs. Leslie turned her head at the moment, and, well pleased to find that Dulcie was apparently so agreeably occupied, returned with redoubled energy to flirting with her companion, Colonel Strange.

Alwyne saw the distress in the girl's face, and it perplexed him greatly.

"Tell me, darling," he whispered, "what is this wretched obstacle? We are as good as alone now: you know you can trust me: it is awfully cruel to keep me in this sus-

pense. I have never known a happy hour since that night at Nice when I last saw you. I went to India, and haven't been back a week. Tell me, darling, I implore you," he urged, in a low voice of entreaty, afraid of attracting Mrs. Leslie's attention.

It was an awful position for Dulcie, who, having been lifted to a seventh heaven of delight at seeing Alwyne, was now plunged into the depths of woe at the remembrance that he could be nothing to her and that it was absolutely impossible for her to tell him why.

"Don't ask me!" she said, miserably. "I can never marry. It is no use talking. Mamma will not hear of it."

"Do you mean, solemnly," asked Alwyne, looking at her as though his eyes could pierce her secret heart, "that you will never be able to marry anybody?"

Dulcie hesitated. There was always the hope that Noel might die: for all she knew, he might be dead already.

Alwyne pressed her for an answer.

"I do not know about never," she said, at last, desperately; "but not yet. I must not even talk or think about it yet. But, oh!" in a very low voice, "could you not, if you really care for me, be patient for a little and wait?"

"Be patient!—good God!" cried Alwyne, unconsciously raising his voice in his excitement, but suddenly checked by the curious looks of two ladies who were passing at the moment. Mrs. Leslie was, fortunately, too much engaged with her colonel to hear his exclamation.

"Pray don't speak so loud," whispered Dulcie, imploringly. "If my cousin were to hear! And if mamma knew I had spoken to you, she would be so dreadfully angry."

"But cannot I meet you somehow without your mother knowing?" he said, eagerly. "Wouldn't your cousin help us?" indicating Mrs. Leslie by a gesture.

"It does not do to trust any one," answered Dulcie, mournfully shaking her head. "I shall not tell her your name. I shall pretend I have forgotten it."

"Is she staying with you? Do you often go out with her?" asked Alwyne.



"Yes. Mamma is not well, and my cousin is taking me about."

Alwyne's face brightened.

"Then I think we shall be able to manage something," he said, hopefully. "Tell me, are you going to many dances or balls just now?"

"I am going to the Fawcetts' to-night," she answered.

"That's capital!" replied the young man, joyfully. "Charlie Fawcett and I were at Eton together. I met him only this morning, and he invited me, though, when I accepted, I had not the smallest intention of going. How I shall look forward to to-night! Do not be late, my darling! Let us, at all events, have one happy evening together. And after that," looking very handsome and resolute, "we will see if something cannot be managed for the future. I don't intend your mother or any one else to spoil our lives."

Dulcie seemed to catch the infection of his spirit. Yes, for once she would be happy; for once she would forget that dreadful sword of Damocles hanging over her.

"Wish me good-by now," she whispered. "I do not want my cousin's suspicions to be excited."

And Alwyne, after protesting, complied at last with deep reluctance.

"Till to-night, then," he whispered, with a string of endearments hanging to the words.

The next time that Mrs. Leslie looked round, Dulcie's companion had disappeared, and she suggested that it was time for them to be going lunchward. Her colonel accompanied them to the Grosvenor gate. When he took leave, Mrs. Leslie questioned Dulcie about her friend in the Row.

"I forget his name," Dulcie replied, mendaciously.

"He is very good-looking,—wonderfully good-looking," remarked Mrs. Leslie. "And I thought he seemed very devoted to you."

"Oh, no," replied Dulcie, "not at all. I met him at Nice; but do not mention him before mamma. For some reason or other she did not like him, and perhaps she might be vexed at his speaking to me."

"I suppose that, like most good-looking young men, he has no money," returned Mrs. Leslie. "Do not be afraid,

my dear: I will be the soul of discretion. But I wonder that he has not made more impression on you. Tell me, Dulcie, have you *never* been in love?"

"I think being in love is a mistake," returned Dulcie, evasively.

"But how can one help it?" said her cousin, gayly. "I have always been in love more or less all my life."

"And is Colonel Strange the last?" asked Dulcie, delighted at the opportunity of turning the conversation away from herself.

Mrs. Leslie blushed like a girl, and all the way home expatiated on the agreeable qualities of Colonel Strange.

Dulcie excused herself from driving with her mother in the afternoon. Her mind was full of excitement: she was looking forward eagerly to the night. But afterwards! What was to happen afterwards? It seemed as if she did not care. Only let her spend these delightful hours with Alwyne,—dance with him, sit out in some sequestered spot with him, hear him say again that he loved her,—and then—come what would! How strangely things happened in the world! These people who were giving the dance to-night were the same at whose house she had met Noel. At this moment Dulcie could not believe or realize that she had ever cared for him: it seemed to her as though she must have been under some fatal spell. When she compared him with Alwyne, she could not imagine what she had ever seen to like in him. But at that time she had not known Alwyne. There was hardly a man of her acquaintance whom she did not prefer to poor Noel, so prejudiced and bitter she felt against him for the suffering and wretchedness he had caused her.

Morton thought her strangely fanciful and capricious as she dressed for the ball that evening. Usually complacently indifferent to her appearance, she seemed to-night intensely anxious about it: nothing could please her or convince her that she was really looking her best. And yet she had never looked so pretty: the unusual animation which excitement lent to her became her amazingly. Her mother was surprised at her beauty, and groaned inwardly as she thought how disastrously its advantages had been thrown away.

Alwyne was on the stairs waiting for Dulcie when she

arrived at the ball, and a moment after she had greeted her hostess his arm was round her, and they were gliding away in the most delightful of waltzes. The rooms were not yet full, and dancing was not only possible but enjoyable. Three-quarters of an hour passed, it was just upon midnight, and Alwyne had not left her for one instant.

Dulcie knew that she was committing the gravest imprudence,—that her mother would never forgive her if she ever came to learn the events of this evening; but, somehow, the danger and wrong of what she was doing only enhanced the excitement and delight of it: she seemed to care nothing for the morrow.

Every one remarked this handsome pair, and their absorption in each other; it was rumored at once that Alwyne had proposed to and been accepted by Miss Vernon.

Mrs. Leslie had some slight misgivings about this very marked flirtation: she had never seen Dulcie give encouragement to any man before, and meant to remonstrate gently with her on the subject; not because she minded herself, but because she was afraid of Mrs. Vernon's reproaches if it came to her ears.

The house in which the ball was given was a new one, built in the old-fashioned style, and there were quaint nooks and corners in it highly suitable and appropriate for *solitudes à deux*. It was close upon midnight when Alwyne sought refuge in one of these delightful spots with his beloved one. It was a curtained recess, partly draped, and screened off by palms and flowers, much sought after by such pairs, who wished for a time to be alone among a crowd and for the moment to live only for each other. Until now, though Alwyne had cast many a longing glance towards this bower, it had not been vacant, but at present his turn had come, and he and Dulcie were, to all intents and purposes, "far from the madding crowd."

Dulcie felt, knew, that she was doing wrong; but the knowledge did not hinder her from doing it: Alwyne had such a mastery over her that she did not even attempt to oppose his will. No fear of their being interrupted. She had refused to engage herself for any dance except those she gave to Alwyne; the edge of her tulle skirt peeping beyond the palms gave notice that the alcove was occupied; and, although there was room for a second couple,



the vacant half was not coveted by those to whom the whole would alone have been acceptable.

Alwyne was madly in love with his pretty companion; he refused to recognize any obstacle to his passion, and Dulcie had almost got beyond the remembrance that there was one. She had assured herself that it was "only for this one evening," and, satisfying her conscience with that excuse, she, as we have known her do on previous occasions, threw prudence to the winds and lived but for the moment. She loved Alwyne: she hated Noel; she banished him from her thoughts and refused to remember his existence or her bond.

Alwyne had given up asking questions. Confident in his own strong will, and buoyed up by his passion, he was determined that all should come right, and defied Fate, Mrs. Vernon, and everything else.

Now he cared for nothing but to feel Dulcie's hand in his, to breathe impassioned words into her dainty ear, to assure himself by the expression of her eyes that her heart was his. He drew her towards him; his lips just touched hers, when there came the crash of a falling palm, and, starting apart, Dulcie with a smothered scream, Alwyne with a muttered curse, they became conscious of a haggard face glaring upon them through the flower-screen. Another moment, and its owner stood panting before them.

"How dare you touch my wife?" he almost shrieked, then staggered and fell forward, and had not Alwyne darted up and caught him he would have fallen prone into Dulcie's lap. For one awful moment the girl was paralyzed; then, as she heard a gurgling sound in the unhappy man's throat, and saw Alwyne holding him, she started up, and, white, scared, terrified as one who has seen a ghost, she hurried to the ball-room, where she had left her cousin.

Most fortunately, Mrs. Leslie was standing by the door. Before she had time even to give a startled ejaculation, Dulcie caught her by the arm.

"Come at once,—at once!" she whispered in a terrified voice. "I must go home. I am ill."

Mrs. Leslie was a woman of tact. She saw that something serious had happened, and that this was not the

time to ask questions. So she complied at once, without a word, accompanied the white, trembling girl down-stairs, sent for the carriage, and hurried her into it the moment it arrived.

When it drove away with them, she asked Dulcie in vain what had happened.

"Oh!" moaned the girl, "I shall die! I shall die! Oh! what will become of me?"

All sorts of dreadful doubts and fears took possession of Mrs. Leslie, but she was forced to remain with them unsatisfied, for the only words that the girl would utter were repeated asseverations that she would die.

That her agitation was connected with the handsome young man who had been her companion all the evening, Mrs. Leslie never for an instant doubted; but what could he have said? what could he have done?

Mrs. Vernon would be very angry,—would never let her chaperon Dulcie again; and, urged by this fear, she said, almost sharply,—

"For goodness' sake, Dulcie, control yourself. Don't let the servants see you in this state. What on earth will your mother say?"

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

MRS. VERNON was still in the drawing-room when they returned. She was generally glad of an excuse to sit up late, and to-night she happened to have an interesting book.

Dulcie saw by the light in the drawing-room that her mother had not retired: she would, therefore, be forced to meet her. Indeed, she was rather glad of this, for she felt it absolutely necessary to tell her of the awful apparition of Noel and to beg her assistance and co-operation against him. So she said hurriedly to her cousin,—

"Do not come into the drawing-room: I must speak to mamma alone. And, whatever you do," imploringly, "do not let out that I met Mr. Temple either to-night or this morning."

Mrs. Leslie took the hint, and went off to her own room, her curiosity aroused to the highest pitch.

Meanwhile Dulcie, still trembling and white as a sheet, went into the drawing-room.

"Good heavens! what has happened? Are you ill, Dulcie?" cried Mrs. Vernon, at sight of the girl's tell-tale face.

Dulcie threw herself into a chair and sobbed hysterically.

Mrs. Vernon, who was strong-minded and had no sympathy with hysterics or violent demonstrations of feeling, said, impatiently,—

"Do not go on in that absurd way, Dulcie! Tell me directly what has happened!"

"Oh, the most awful thing!" sobbed Dulcie, racking her brain to think how she should avoid all mention of Alwyne in the terrible avowal.

"What? what?" cried her mother. "Tell me at once! What awful thing?"

"*He* was there!" almost shrieked Dulcie, and gave vent to redoubled expressions of emotion.

"He! who?" said Mrs. Vernon; but she had a strong conviction as to who the man represented by the personal pronoun was.

She rose.

"Now, Dulcie," she said, "for heaven's sake exercise a little self-control and tell me what has happened."

"I had been dancing," sobbed Dulcie, "and I was sitting out,—and—and suddenly I saw a dreadful face glaring at me through the flowers, and then he came round the corner and said something about 'my wife!' and fell down in a fit."

Mrs. Vernon turned as white as her daughter. In a moment she conjured up a terrible scene of curious eyes and whispering tongues and her unfortunate daughter the heroine of a most painful *esclandre*. She stood as if turned to stone.

"Who was with you?" she asked at last. "Did many people see this—this dreadful scene?"

"No," gasped Dulcie. "Only—the man I was dancing with. I left him with—with the other, and rushed away and found Cousin Anna, and we came off at once."

"And what did you tell Anna?"



"Nothing,—not a word," sobbed Dulcie.

"Did you give her no explanation?"

"No."

"And who was the man you were dancing with?"

"I don't know his name," answered mendacious Dulcie.

"Do you think he heard what—what the other said?"

"I don't know. He was holding him up, and I rushed away. And oh, mamma! what *am* I to do? Perhaps he will come here. Oh, I can't, I won't see him! What shall I do?" Dulcie's distress was so intense, her look of terror so real, that Mrs. Vernon had not the heart to add to her wretchedness.

"I do not know. We must think about it," she answered.

"Oh, mamma! for pity's sake, take me away somewhere! hide me! Oh, don't let him find me! Oh, perhaps if you give him money he will go away and leave me alone!" And this was the young lady who had been so ardently attached to Mr. Trevor that she had walked out of her mother's house and married him clandestinely, and here, without any fault or crime on his part, on the very next occasion of their meeting she was filled with horror and loathing of him, and asking whether he could not be bought off! As this passed through Mrs. Vernon's mind, she almost pitied Noel as much as she despised her daughter.

"How came I to bring such a child into the world?" she groaned in spirit; but she kept the thought to herself.

"You had better go to bed now," she said, "and I will think the matter over. As soon after eight as you are awake in the morning, send for me, and I will tell you what conclusion I have come to. Do not say a word to Morton of what has happened: tell her you were taken ill at the ball: she must think what she likes."

When Dulcie had left her, Mrs. Vernon sought her cousin with a view of eliciting what she knew or suspected.

"The most extraordinary thing imaginable!" exclaimed Mrs. Leslie. "Ten minutes before, I had seen her dancing apparently in the best of spirits, and suddenly she rushed up to me looking as if she had seen a ghost. Fortunately, most of the people had gone down to supper, and I managed to get her away without attracting much attention.

But, my dear Margaret, what was it? She would not tell me a word, and I could get nothing out of her except that she would die."

"It is no very great matter," replied Mrs. Vernon, speaking in a light, unconcerned tone. "There was a man whose attentions to her gave us a little trouble last winter, and I fancy from what she tells me that he made rather a scene, and then fainted. Very disagreeable, of course, and poor Dulcie is not very strong-minded, you know. But with whom was she dancing?"

"I really did not notice," replied Mrs. Leslie, for all three ladies had made up their minds to tell each other stories pretty freely.

If Mrs. Vernon had known the truth, it would have assisted her immensely in making her plans; but it did not for a single instant enter her brain to consider that Mr. Temple had played a part, and a very important part too, in this painful affair.

Little sleep visited her that night: the great question which occupied her brain was how this terrible affair was to be settled with as little scandal as possible. Noel was now partially recovered, though evidently still weak: there could be no question that he would claim his wife. She must, if possible, persuade him to consent to some weeks' delay whilst a pretence of courtship was gone through, and then he and Dulcie must be quietly remarried in church. She did not despair of bringing him to reason, and was much more occupied in thinking how Dulcie was to be managed. That this sudden distaste for him would last, Mrs. Vernon did not for an instant believe; if she had been, or fancied herself, so fond of him once, the feeling would return when they were thrown together again. In any case she had elected to marry him, and had no choice but to take the consequences.

Noel would write or come to the house, and it would be best for all parties that Dulcie should be out of the way. Mrs. Vernon bethought her that she might send Dulcie off that very day to an aunt at Brighton. Eight o'clock had scarcely struck when there was a tap at her door, followed by the entrance of Dulcie, white, wide-eyed, looking the picture of fright and misery.

"I have been awake since five," she said, "but was

afraid to disturb you before. Oh, mamma! have you thought of anything?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Vernon, cheerfully: "I am going to telegraph to your aunt Clara to know if she will take you in for a few days."

Dulcie sighed with an air of great relief.

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed. "Anything to get away!"

Mrs. Vernon wrote on a telegraph form,—

*"Can you have Dulcie for a few days? Wants change. If so, will send her by one-fifty. Answer paid."*

She rang for the housemaid and gave orders that it was to be sent at once. Then she seated herself in an arm-chair, and, looking at Dulcie, said, quietly,—

"We must now decide how matters are to be arranged. You are, as I told you, as much Mr. Trevor's wife as though you had been married in church, and he can claim you at any moment he chooses. He will have to go through certain legal formalities with the court of chancery, and will be compelled, fortunately for you, to consent to your money being settled upon yourself. I shall endeavor to persuade him to ignore for the present the ceremony at the registry-office, to make a pretence of being engaged to you, and to marry you in church in a few weeks' time."

"Oh, mamma!" cried Dulcie, trembling like a leaf, "can nothing be done? Can it not be proved illegal, or cannot I get a divorce?"

"I have told you," replied her mother, coldly, "that you are his wife. Nothing can alter the fact. And it seems a most extraordinary thing to me that, if you were so desperately in love with him a few months ago that you could defy everything and everybody in order to marry him, you should now, without a shadow of reason, have changed so completely."

Dulcie sat looking the picture of misery and anguish.

"At all events," pursued Mrs. Vernon, "it will be best for you to be out of the way for the present. I will hear what he has to say and write, or perhaps go to you and tell you the result."

In less than an hour the answer to the telegram arrived. It would be quite convenient for Dulcie to go as soon as she liked.



Then Morton was ordered to pack her young lady's trunk. She could not be spared to accompany her, but Mrs. John Vernon's maid would do everything that was necessary. Mrs. Vernon enjoined the strictest secrecy on Dulcie,—which, however, was unnecessary. The girl was too thoroughly miserable and ashamed of the whole affair to want to confide it to any one.

She had been gone nearly an hour when a card was brought to Mrs. Vernon, who was sitting at luncheon with Mrs. Leslie.

"*Mr. Alwyne Temple,*" she read, with unfeigned annoyance.

"Is Mr. Temple in the drawing-room?" she asked, rather sharply, of the butler.

"Yes, ma'am."

Why in the name of all that was disagreeable should *he* add to her perplexities by coming at this particular juncture? When the card was handed to her, the name she had fully expected to read was that of Trevor.

However, there was no help for it: he was in the house, and she must see him. She rose with an expression of great annoyance, and left Mrs. Leslie feeling rather frightened and guilty.

Mrs. Vernon assumed her coldest, stiffest manner as she entered the drawing-room. Alwyne himself looked to the full as haughty.

She seated herself, and motioned him to a chair.

He began what he had to say at once with the air of a person who, having right on his side, is not to be intimidated by any show of aggressiveness on the part of his opponent.

"You will remember," he said, stiffly, "that last winter at Nice I proposed for the hand of Miss Vernon."

Miss Vernon's mother made a cold gesture of assent.

"You informed me that there was an obstacle to my suit, but you declined absolutely to inform me as to the nature of that obstacle."

Mrs. Vernon made another gesture of cold affirmation.

"May I ask," proceeded Alwyne with a particularly disagreeable and supercilious inflection of voice, "whether the obstacle which you declined to state was that your daughter has a husband already?"

For a moment the room seemed to Mrs. Vernon to swim. Her self-possession deserted her. She had been absolutely unprepared for such a blow as this.

She was silent: she could really not find one word to say. Then, partly recovering herself, and endeavoring to reassume her cold, stiff manner, she said,—

“I must really ask you to explain yourself.”

“By all means,” returned Alwyne, with alacrity. “I had been dancing with Miss Vernon,—I beg her pardon, Mrs. —, I do not know her name,—and was sitting out with her, when suddenly our conversation was broken in upon by a man who asked me how I dared touch *his wife*, and then proceeded to have a fit, in which I had the honor of rendering him assistance.”

Mrs. Vernon was rent by conflicting feelings: the principal one was anger against her daughter. Dulcie’s unpardonable duplicity filled her with wrath: she would not be made the scapegoat of her folly and wickedness any longer: let the consequences be on her own head! Again she was silent for some seconds.

“I quite see, from the manner in which you receive my communication,” proceeded Alwyne, almost insolently, “that I have discovered the real obstacle. But I must confess one thing astonishes me, and that is that both Miss Vernon or Mrs. —, whatever her name is, and yourself allowed me to believe that I might ultimately hope. I presume you were counting on this—this person’s death: he seems to be in very indifferent health.”

Mrs. Vernon was goaded beyond endurance by his tone.

“I have no longer any wish to screen my daughter,” she said. “Her folly is so unaccountable that I cannot pretend to extricate her from the dilemmas into which she is always getting herself. I shall tell you the facts of the case. If you are a gentleman,”—and she flashed a look upon him which plainly intimated that she thought his claim to that title very doubtful,—“you will consider my confidences sacred; if not, you must, if you choose, publish them to the world.”

And she proceeded to relate to his astonished ears the story which we already know, together with her views and intentions for the future.

Indignant as Alwyne was on his own account, he could

not help feeling for the moment that the unfortunate mother had been hardly used, and he forbore to express his anger at the deceit which had been practised upon himself, and merely said that it was very strange and a very bad business, and that Mrs. Vernon might rely upon his keeping what she had told him strictly secret. So they parted on better terms than might have been expected,—Alwyne going his way, stunned and perplexed at the behavior of his adored Dulcie, and Mrs. Vernon leaning back in her chair, filled with wrath and bitterness against her daughter, and determined to be rid of all responsibility about her as soon as possible.

She was still sitting, a prey to anger and wretchedness, when the butler brought her in a note.

This simply contained a request for an interview, and was signed "Noel Trevor."

Mrs. Vernon groaned in spirit. But the interview must be gone through with, and she made up her mind that the best thing would be to get it over as soon as possible. She wrote an answer saying that Mr. Trevor could call as soon as he felt disposed, told the butler she would be at home only to Mr. Trevor that afternoon, sent a message to Mrs. Leslie that she would not drive until late, and then endeavored to brace her nerves for the coming encounter.

How often she had congratulated herself upon having a pretty daughter! Now she only lamented bitterly that she had ever had a child at all. She absolutely longed to get rid of her and all the worry and trouble which she involved. Instead of the wrath which she had always intended to pour out on Noel when she should see him, she now prepared to meet him with calm indifference and to make preparations to hand over his wife to him at as early a date as decency permitted. What Dulcie felt in the matter was of but small concern in her eyes.

Only a quarter of an hour elapsed before Noel was ushered into her presence. He looked dreadfully haggard and ill; and, although she felt but scant pity for him, she devoutly hoped that he was not going to faint or make a scene.

She bowed, without offering her hand, and pointed to a chair.

"I see," she said, "that you are still ill. You had better



take time to compose yourself: we are not likely to be interrupted."

Poor Noel sat down and made a violent effort to control his agitation.

"I am quite prepared to hear all you have to say," observed Mrs. Vernon, quietly, her one object being to prevent him from exciting himself dangerously and causing a catastrophe.

"I feel," he said at last, in a trembling tone, "that you must think very badly of me." And he looked imploringly at her.

"It does not much matter what I think of you," she answered, coldly. "It will be more to the point to talk about what you propose for the future."

A great load was taken from the young man's mind: no opposition was going to be offered to his claim, and he became calmer at once.

"You are married to my daughter," pursued Mrs. Vernon. "Unpleasant as the fact is, it is not one that can be got over. The only thing that surprises me is that you have allowed all this time to elapse without making any sign."

"I have had a dreadful illness," said Noel, eagerly. "For weeks after the accident I was unconscious; then I remained in an apathetic state for months, scarcely remembering or caring to think of anything. It is only within the last six weeks that my health has improved so much that I have been really able to think seriously about the future. And—and not hearing a word from—Dulcie,"—he hesitated over the name, as though it were a liberty to pronounce it,—“I was in doubt how to approach her; and—and I thought I ought to get quite strong before—before I——”

He broke down, too embarrassed to know how to continue.

"And yet," said Mrs. Vernon, "you were well enough to go to a ball last night."

"I went with the hope of seeing and speaking to her," exclaimed Noel, eagerly. "I called at the house that morning, hoping to hear something about her, and they told me they were giving a dance, and pressed me to go to it, and I went. And then," added the poor lad,

growing painfully agitated, "when I saw her with another man's arm round her,—another man's lips touching hers,—I think I went mad; and I don't remember what happened afterwards until I was in the cab driving home."

And Noel hid his face in his hands, and groaned.

This was another pleasing revelation for the mother: Alwyne's arm round her daughter's waist, his lips touching hers. Decidedly the sooner she had a husband to look after her the better. She felt almost sorry for Noel.

"Are you sure of what you say?" she asked, in a chill voice. "I can hardly believe my daughter capable of such—such an indiscretion. Do you not think that you were perhaps under the influence of some delusion, as your brain cannot be very strong at present?"

"No! no!" he groaned. "I saw it all too well. The infernal villain!"

"Pray control yourself," interposed Mrs. Vernon, coldly. "But, now, what do you propose to do?"

"May I not see her?" cried Noel, the color flushing into his pale face. "Oh, pray, pray, do let me! She did love me—oh, perhaps if I see her, she will explain all!"

"You cannot see her," returned Mrs. Vernon. "She has gone to Brighton; and perhaps it will be better to tell you the truth, even if it is not very palatable: she shrinks from the idea of seeing you."

"Oh, my God!" cried Noel; and he leaned his elbows on the table, and the tears trickled fast through his fingers.

He was very weak at present, poor fellow!

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## CHAPTER XIX.

"You will see her, of course," said Mrs. Vernon, feeling just the least bit sorry for him. "But, before you can consider her your wife, you will have to go through a form of—of courtship and to marry her in a church, as I would not for one moment allow the story of that disgraceful affair at the registry office to be known."

"I will do anything,—anything!" cried Noel.

"And you will have to attend at the court of chancery and agree to her money being settled upon herself."

Noel flushed.

"You do not, I hope, think," he cried, "that any consideration of money influenced me in the matter."

"Most people would think so," returned Mrs. Vernon, chillingly.

"I swear," cried the young man, "that I never knew she had a penny; never had a thought or wish but for herself."

"I believe you have not any means of supporting a girl accustomed to every comfort and luxury," observed Mrs. Vernon.

Noel hung his head.

"I thought our love would help us to get over that," he murmured.

"I have frequently heard that theory," said Mrs. Vernon, contemptuously. "But I never knew it answer in practice. My daughter has never in her life wanted for anything, and I do not think she is a girl to bear poverty and discomfort cheerfully."

Noel bit his lip and looked the picture of misery.

"However," proceeded Mrs. Vernon, "when she is of age she will have a thousand a year, and, meantime, you will have to manage as best you can. I presume you intend to join your regiment in India?"

"I have not communicated with my colonel yet," answered Noel: "the doctor did not think me quite fit for duty. I suppose as I did not go out with the regiment I shall have to join at the dépôt first, unless I can get sent out with a draft."

"I should think you had better go to India, if possible," said Mrs. Vernon, who, after all that she had gone through with Dulcie, felt that it would be a relief to get rid of her entirely.

"I should like it best," exclaimed Noel, brightening; "and—she—seemed quite willing in the winter. When may I see her?"

"When she returns from Brighton, in a day or two. If you leave me your address, I will let you know when to call."

Noel felt that his mother-in-law was behaving much



better than he could have expected. He had a good heart, and was smitten with remorse at the thought of the pain and grief he must have caused her.

"I am afraid," he said, diffidently, "that you must have rather a bad opinion of me. I hope you will forgive me for the trouble I have caused you."

The remembrance of her wrongs rose forcibly in the mother's breast, and she said, with a burst of anger,—

"Until she met you, Dulcie had never given me a moment's anxiety. She was my one hope and comfort in life. I looked forward to her making a good marriage,—to seeing her happy and well provided for. You have wrecked all my hopes. You taught her to deceive me; you inflicted on me the severest blow I ever had in my life: take care that your sin does not recoil on your own head, and that she does not deceive you! I cannot unmarry you: all I now wish is to see and hear as little of both of you in the future as possible."

Noel was crushed: he had no answer to make, and rose, looking very humble and crestfallen, to take leave. He was even forgetting, in his embarrassment, to give his address.

"Where are you to be found?" asked Mrs. Vernon, stiffly; and he wrote his address on a card with a trembling hand, and then, bowing, left the room, as his hostess did not attempt to proffer her hand.

When he had reached home, and had leisure to think, he was assailed by all manner of painful doubts. Dulcie, his darling, his dear sweet little wife, as he had thought of her over and over again, shrank from him,—had gone away to avoid him! Did she care for that other man in whose embrace—curse him!—he had seen her? His blood boiled at the recollection. Then Mrs. Vernon's words came back to him:

"Take care that she does not deceive you!"

He had imagined that her silence since the accident had been the result of fear of her mother; he had felt sure that she would be as happy at being restored to him, though that was hardly possible, as he would be at finding her once again. He had never realized the possibility of another man stepping in between them.

He felt that he must see her,—must know the truth

from her own lips ; and he resolved to go to Brighton that very evening and endeavor to find her.

Although he and Alwyne went down in the same train on the same quest, neither happened to come across nor to guess at the other's vicinity. For Mrs. Vernon had also mentioned to Alwyne that her daughter had gone to her aunt in Brighton, little imagining that now he knew she had a husband the young man would dream of following her, or of attempting to see her again. But Alwyne, after his first ebullition of wrath, returned afresh to his tenderness for Dulcie, and, feeling sure that she was in reality devoted to him and indifferent to his rival, all sorts of wild projects of carrying her off seethed in his mind, though he pretended to himself that he only intended to reproach her and bid her farewell forever.

Noel spent the morning after his arrival at Brighton in pursuit of his wife. He had to keep reminding himself that she was his wife, his lawful wife ; for the most distressing doubts of her love harassed his brain. It was a fine morning, and she was sure to be out somewhere : at Brighton people never stay in-doors. He walked along the King's Road, the Esplanade, went on the West Pier, scanning every face eagerly. Then he took a victoria, and, bidding the man drive slowly, went up to Kemp Town. And when he very nearly reached the end, he caught sight of a pretty figure in a neat, tailor-made dress, sauntering along listlessly, and his heart gave a great bound as he recognized Mrs. Noel Trevor. He stopped the carriage, paid the driver, and walked slowly after her, so agitated and trembling that he was forced to stop for a moment and support himself by the wooden rail.

Dulcie took a seat in one of the embrasures and looked out seaward. There was no one near, except a nurse-girl lazily pushing a perambulator, and Noel waited until she was out of earshot before he approached.

Then he came close up and said, in a low voice,—

“Dulcie!”

The girl gave a little gasp of terror and looked at him with affrighted eyes. He sat down beside her, and she started up, as if for fright.

“For God's sake!” cried poor Noel, “don't look at me like that!”

And he laid a detaining hand on her arm, and trembled violently, half from emotion, half from weakness.

"Have you forgotten?" he went on. "Don't you care for me any longer?"

A shrinking horror of him crept through Dulcie's veins. She remained motionless, speechless, looking at him with cold distaste. How had she ever cared for him? How inferior he was in every way to Alwyne! and now he looked so shrunk and ill and haggard, he was almost repulsive to her. She felt no pity for his distress,—nothing but repugnance. His eyes were fixed on her whilst he awaited for some answer to his impassioned words, but none came: she was thinking how she could get away from him.

"Dulcie," he said again, imploringly, "after all I have suffered, have you nothing to say to me? Don't you care for me any longer?"

"No," she answered, remorselessly. "I do not care for you. You got some bad influence over me and persuaded me to deceive my mother. I was so young, I did not know any better. It was very wicked and cruel of you."

Great heaven! this was his reception, after all his tender dreams of his darling wife and of their meeting and reunion!

"What has changed you?" he asked, in a hollow, miserable voice. "You did care for me." Then, with sudden passion, drawing near to her, "Oh, my darling, how can you be so cruel to me?"

"Do not touch me!" she cried, crouching into the corner of the seat; "do not come near me!"

A wild feeling of jealousy surged through Noel's heart as he remembered the scene at the ball.

"You could bear another man to touch you,—to put his arm round you,—to kiss your lips!" he cried, violently. "My God! why had I not strength to kill him? But I will hunt him down! I will——"

He stopped suddenly: a horrible faintness was creeping over him: he felt that he must control himself or he would swoon or die.

He leaned back for a moment, gasping, so pale and haggard that Dulcie was terrified.

She remained speechless in her crouching posture, and



after a few moments Noel was able to speak with more self-command.

"I am not very strong yet," he said, and then added, with a tremulous yearning in his voice,—

"Why do you look like that? Why should you be afraid of me? Do I not love you better than anything in the world?"

But his words of tenderness were hateful to Dulcie. She had not a grain of either love or pity for him. She said obstinately to herself that he had entrapped and deceived her. He was the obstacle and stumbling-block in the way of her happiness. She even had a shadowy idea that if he would give her up she might still be happy with Alwyne.

"What is the use of your loving me?" she said, looking away at the sea. "I do not love you; I never shall. If you really cared for me, you would go away, and give me a chance of being happy."

"With him?" asked Noel, in a cold, bitter voice. "You do not seem to realize that you are my wife; that I have the right to claim you now, this moment; that I can, if I choose, take you away with me here and now, and that no one can stop me."

"I will not go with you," cried Dulcie. "I would rather throw myself into the sea. You entrapped and cheated me into marrying you: you only wanted my money. And now, if it were not for you, I could marry a man whom I love, and who is rich, and whom mamma would be only too glad for me to marry. I will never, *never* be your wife. I hate you!"

Fear and dislike of him had worked the girl up almost to frenzy. She looked at him with fierce defiance. She seemed capable of throwing herself into the sea to escape him.

Noel looked at her for a moment, and then slowly turned his eyes seaward. The bitterness of death seemed to creep over him: love, youth, life, wrestled in a dying agony on his heart. It was engulfed as though all those shining, sunlit waves had gone over it and stifled every atom of hope and joy in the cruel sands below.

Morning after morning, as life and strength had come slowly back to him, he had thought and dreamed of this

fair, pretty face; but in his visions there was a tender love-light in the eyes, happy smiles dimpled the mouth, and he had indulged in the most blissful anticipations of their meeting,—of her joy at his recovery,—of the blessed future that was to atone for all the anguish he had gone through. Was this pale girl, with hatred in her looks, and wild words of anger and defiance on her lips, the cherished darling of his dreams and thoughts? or was this scene some wild fantasy of his still distraught brain? No, it was all too true. He was wide awake. Dulcie was beside him. Whilst he lay battling with death, another man had come and stolen her from him, even as he had stolen her from her mother. His own guilt was borne in upon him with cruel force.

And now she hated him. Gracious heaven! she had taunted him with having sought her for her money; she had sworn that, sooner than be his, she would throw herself into the sea. Oh, God! at that moment how he wished that he was lying under those glittering waves, with his darling locked in his arms,—his darling of other days; not this frightened, angry, unloving woman beside him. The future seemed to grow clear to him as he sat there, his heart full of deadly despair: he must go away to India, and by some means or other set her free. Would he force her to unwilling bonds? What joy or pleasure could he have of her, since she hated him?

He sat motionless, his eyes seeming to gaze at the restless waters, patched with blue and purple and pale green, with here and there a tiny fleck of foam on the crest of a wavelet.

Dulcie watched him with bated breath at first, and then, as he made no sign or movement, she began to speculate upon the possibility of getting away from him. Suddenly, as he seemed lost to consciousness, she darted up and fled away. Noel did not move, did not even turn to glance after her; he had looked his last upon her: this fair girl whom he had loved so tenderly, upon whom all his hopes had centred, was to be no more to him henceforth forever.

He did not know clearly what he meant to do, only that he would go far away from her and never trouble her more: he would get out to his regiment as soon as pos-

sible, and when the wide seas were between them she, at all events, would rejoice.

Meantime, Dulcie, with a beating heart, gained her aunt's house, and flew to her room to compose her agitated feelings and features before going down to lunch.

Mrs. John Vernon was a stout, comfortable lady, by no means of an inquisitive or suspicious turn of mind, and too much absorbed in her pugs and birds to take much interest in her own species. She observed nothing unusual in Dulcie's manner, and never dreamed, simple-minded lady, of the very dramatic circumstances in which her niece was placed.

Every day, winter and summer, if the weather was at all passable, Mrs. John Vernon took her drive with her pugs. She invited Dulcie to accompany her this afternoon, but Dulcie excused herself, and her aunt did not press the matter: the pugs would be more comfortable and less cramped.

The carriage came round, with its fat horses and sleek coachman, the perfect type of a wealthy widow's equipage, and Dulcie saw aunt and pets depart. She remained for some time at the window, looking out at the sea, thinking to herself that she was the most unfortunate girl in the world, and wondering what the end of all this dreadful business was to be. As she sat there, the sea faded from her eyes; the sound of the waves ceased from her ears: she was back in the bower at the ball, with Alwyne's arm round her, his voice breathing sweet words which troubled her brain and senses.

She started as the door was flung open, and the butler, with a beaming face, announced "Mr. Temple."

He was an old servant, and of a benevolent disposition: he saw, or fancied he saw, why Miss Dulcie had declined to drive, and thought he was indeed doing something extremely pleasing to her by ushering in this handsome young gentleman.

Alwyne had looked in a Brighton directory, and, finding the name of Mrs. John Vernon, had concluded she must be the aunt whom Dulcie was visiting. He had no idea of what he meant to say if he saw her; he did not know that he would even see her, much less see her alone; and when he found himself face to face with her he was



almost as much embarrassed as she was. Both commanded themselves sufficiently ere the door closed on the butler to exchange the ordinary, commonplace greeting in the ordinary manner, but after that there was a pause. Dulcie stood looking down, Alwyne went to the window. Two feelings were struggling in him, delight at seeing his beloved again, and an aggrieved sense that he had been badly used. The latter obtaining the mastery, he turned, and coming towards her, said, in a reproachful tone,—

“Why did you deceive me?”

Dulcie proceeded to defend herself. Her nature was deficient in generosity and in a sense of justice: like all weak persons, she was wont to defend herself at the expense of some one else. On this occasion, poor Noel, against whom her mind was entirely poisoned, was the scapegoat. She depicted him as a villain and seducer of the deepest dye; she proved clearly to Alwyne's thirsting ears how entirely innocent she had been throughout,—an unhappy dupe in the hands of a designing man. And Dulcie related with triumph the interview of the morning in which she had poured her hatred and contempt upon him,—described the scene with glistening eyes and raised voice, as though she had been some brave and virtuous heroine bearding an unscrupulous villain.

Alwyne forgot the wrong this fair creature had done him as he sat listening to her, drinking in with rapture the story of the discomfiture of his rival, and filled with a sort of heroic ardor of championship and a great but vague idea that he was going to be her deliverer, though at the present moment he could not quite see how.

“We must do something to rid you of this ruffian!” he said, excitedly, getting up and pacing the room.

“I will be grateful to you forever,” cried Dulcie. “Oh, you don't know how he frightened me this morning with his violence. He said I was his wife and he could take me away then and there if he chose and no one could hinder him!”

Alwyne swore under his breath. This was indeed an awful contingency. No man, he said, hotly, could be blackguard enough to force a woman who hated him to live with him.

“I will kill myself first!” cried Dulcie, excitedly.

"No, darling!" replied Alwyne, soothingly: "you must not talk like that. I will move heaven and earth to free you from him. Surely there must be a way out of it. I believe myself it was a bogus marriage. But remember one thing: if he should attempt to carry you off by force, you must escape and come straight to me, and we will see then," cried Alwyne, looking very handsome and determined, "whether any mortal power can get you away from me!"

For a long time they talked eagerly over all sorts of possibilities and contingencies. Alwyne declared that he would go up to London and consult his solicitor, and between them they would assuredly find some means to free her from this hateful bond. He talked both himself and Dulcie into quite a cheerful frame of mind, and when he took leave of her, both their hearts beat high with hope.

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## CHAPTER XX.

MRS. VERNON, after her two interviews, was in a state of irritation against her daughter that she could scarcely control. She recognized the fact that to contend with this seemingly weak girl was like buffeting water. Now she had but one desire, and that was to marry her to Noel; for to go on living under the same roof with her on amicable terms was more than Mrs. Vernon felt capable of. She could not watch and dog her every step and movement; and duplicity now seemed like second nature to Dulcie. The mother had not patience to fight against the weapon she so abhorred and despised. Besides, Dulcie was Noel's wife, and could not be unmarried: so the sooner he carried off his prize the better. And in her heart Mrs. Vernon bitterly wished him joy of her.

After a great deal of reflection, she decided to go down the next day to Brighton and bring Dulcie back. She did not intend to have any discussion with her if it could be avoided, but as soon as convenient after their return she would send for Noel, bring the young couple face to face,

and let them settle matters themselves. As for Dulcie's reluctance, she cared not one straw: she had married him, and must abide by the consequences.

The day after her two interviews, Mrs. Vernon betook herself to Brighton by the one-fifty train, which should have arrived at three-fifteen, but was twenty minutes late. Her sister-in-law would think it odd her coming to fetch Dulcie after a stay of twenty-four hours; but there were much graver considerations involved than Mrs. John Vernon's surprise.

The fly which conveyed her from the station had arrived within half a dozen doors of her sister-in-law's house, when a young man came running down the steps with an excited and triumphant expression of countenance, and Mrs. Vernon was almost transfixed with anger and astonishment as she recognized Alwyne. He did not see her, but went on his way rejoicing.

"What can I do with such a creature!" cried the distracted mother, between her teeth, feeling a violent desire to fly at and beat this hopelessly good-for-nothing daughter of hers.

She had to control herself by an immense effort to meet the smiling butler, an old servant in the family, with an answering smile, to inquire after Mrs. John, and whether Miss Dulcie was at home.

And then she was ushered into the drawing-room, where the dear girl was nursing all sorts of charming dreams.

The mother could scarcely control her voice to speak. She did not intend to have any discussion now: if once she let loose the flood-gates of her wrath, she felt that she would hardly be answerable for her words or actions. She glacially bade Dulcie go at once and see to her things being packed, as they were to return to London by the five-o'clock train. Dulcie divined that some dreadful catastrophe had happened, and was only too glad to escape from the room and assist her aunt's maid, who plied her with many expressions of wonder and regret at her short stay, to pack. Mrs. Vernon sat in the drawing-room, staring at the sea, with a horrible weight at her heart,—a weight of anger and despair. She was a clever woman: as a rule, she had no difficulty in circumventing people, and making those at all events over whom she had



any authority do what she pleased; but this frail, foolish girl utterly baffled her and set her plans at naught. What had Alwyne been doing there? She, of course, imagined that Dulcie had informed him of her whereabouts. From the satisfied expression of his face, the interview with Dulcie must have been a pleasing one: possibly she had consented to fly with him.

The unhappy mother determined to send for Noel the very next morning and to fix the earliest date possible for the marriage in church: it would not have required much persuasion on Noel's part now to get her consent to carry off Dulcie with no further ceremony than the one which had already been performed in the registry-office.

As good fortune would have it, Mrs. John did not return from her drive before it was time for her guests to leave: so, bidding the butler make her excuses, and promising to write, Mrs. Vernon carried her daughter off to London.

She did not speak one word during the journey: indeed, words would have choked her. It was no use asking for explanations: she would only be met by falsehood. At dinner, and during the evening, not one word was exchanged between mother and daughter: each talked in turn to Mrs. Leslie; and she, though devoured by curiosity to know what had happened, feigned not to remark anything unusual, and chatted away gaily. She knew it was hopeless to expect a communication from Mrs. Vernon, but she hoped to extract some explanation from gentle and pliable Dulcie. When they were alone for a moment she cried,—

“My dear child, what is all this terrible mystery about?”

But Dulcie, with an uneasy smile, declared that it was nothing,—nothing at all,—and would not be beguiled into a word of confidence. She distrusted every one but Alwyne.

As for Morton, she was on tenter-hooks, and did not fail to ask her young lady point-blank what was going on, and why Mr. Trevor and Mr. Temple had both been to see her mamma; but Dulcie obstinately refused to answer her, and Morton was in high dudgeon.

After dinner Mrs. Vernon wrote a note to Noel requesting him to call the following morning. His first impulse

on reading it was to excuse himself; but on second thoughts he decided that he owed it to Mrs. Vernon to explain why he was going away without claiming his wife, lest she should conceive an unjust idea of him and his motives. He would not have risked seeing Dulcie again, but he believed her to be at Brighton, which he had left almost immediately after their painful interview.

Mrs. Vernon had given private orders to the butler that when Mr. Trevor arrived he was to be ushered into the drawing-room and she was to be told that some one wished to see her: no name was to be mentioned before the other ladies. She anticipated the possibility of Dulcie's flying to her room and locking herself in if she became aware that Noel was in the house.

When Noel arrived and Mrs. Vernon went to the drawing-room to receive him, her feelings were of quite a different nature from any she could have entertained for him a week previously. She rather wished to propitiate him: instead of the anger and contempt she had felt for him, she was now disposed to regard him with a certain amount of respect, and was almost afraid of his learning her daughter's shortcomings, lest he should be less ready to accept the serious responsibility of taking charge of her.

To-day, as she advanced to meet him, her manner was by many degrees more cordial: she even offered him her hand. She was shocked to see how ill he looked and to remark the melancholy written in every line of his wan face. She was even a little sorry for him. She did not like the hopeless expression that he wore: it augured ill for her plans and wishes. But she feigned not to remark anything, and said, in a cheerful voice,—

"I think we had better settle about your marriage as soon as possible. This state of things is very unsatisfactory."

If she expected a brightening of Noel's face and an ardent assent to her words, she must have been disappointed. If possible, a deeper gloom spread itself over his face, and he looked persistently at the carpet.

"You do not seem very anxious," exclaimed Mrs. Vernon, a flush rising to her face and a considerable tartness lending itself to her voice.

He looked up at her.

"Do you know that I have seen—your daughter?" he asked.

"Seen her? How? When? Where?" cried Mrs. Vernon.

"Yesterday morning, at Brighton. I went there in the hope of seeing her, and I met her out walking, and—and——"

"And what?"

"She said"—and poor Noel's voice faltered—"that she hated me and would rather kill herself than be my wife. And, oh, my God!" cried the poor lad, "she said she loved *him!*"

He buried his face in his hands, and tears oozed through his thin fingers. Mrs. Vernon wondered to herself how much exasperation it was possible to endure without apoplexy supervening. She did not believe that, in the record of mothers and daughters, mother had ever been so tried as she. Was this girl utterly devoid of all sense—of all decency?

Her manner to Noel softened considerably. She almost felt like a shopwoman offering damaged goods which she was anxious to get rid of.

"But," she said, after a pause, "that is nonsense. You are her husband, and she must accept the fate she herself chose. Nothing can annul the marriage, and she must make the best of it: indeed, I hope, when she sees more of you, her affection will return, and that all will be well!"

She was trying to bolster up her own hopes as well as Noel's, but all the time a disagreeable presentiment seized her that neither he nor she would be able to cope with Dulcie. She almost regretted that he was not somewhat of the villain she had imagined him; for then he would have carried things with a strong hand.

"I love her with all my heart," groaned Noel, "and she did love me, or else why——" And here he stopped short. Then, with a sudden inspiration, he looked up at Mrs. Vernon, and asked, "Has she known this man long? Where did she meet him, and when did——?" But he could not bring his voice to finish the sentence.

A half-frightened recollection of her own share in the catastrophe rushed through Mrs. Vernon's brain. She re-



membered that it was she who had given Dulcie to understand that her marriage was not legal, and that it was in consequence of this representation that the girl had considered herself free to accept Alwyne's attentions.

But for the moment she felt it impossible to confess this to Noel.

"We met him at Nice," she answered, with some hesitation. "He is the nephew of an old school-friend of mine, with whom we were travelling."

"And this," cried poor Noel, "must have been not a month after our marriage!"

"You must remember," pleaded Mrs. Vernon, "that she had heard nothing of you,—that she did not even know if the marriage was legal."

Noel interrupted her with flashing eyes.

"I will never believe," he cried, "that she would have doubted me, unless some one had influenced her against me."

There was a moment's silence, during which Mrs. Vernon was fighting a severe battle with herself. She possessed in a marked degree the truthful and honorable instincts which, as a rule, the sterner sex are exclusively credited with, but which may yet be found in many women, whilst they are absent from many men.

She abhorred lying and deceit, and she was naturally a fearless and courageous woman: indeed, from the independent life she had so long led, she had been unaccustomed to fear anything or any one. She was proud, and nothing could gall her so much as to be proved to have acted unworthily. It was less difficult to her to confess herself wrong than to bear to be accused by another person.

For a moment it was a hard fight; then the honorable instinct prevailed.

"I will be quite straightforward with you," she said, and her voice involuntarily assumed a haughty accent. "When my daughter returned home on the day of the accident, and I learned the truth, I did not for a moment believe the marriage to be binding, and I told her so. And when, later, I learned that it was, I did not undeceive her, thinking she might commit some fresh imprudence. And, besides," hesitating, for it was hardly a pleasant thing to

say, "you were in such a critical condition that it was not supposed you would recover. In which case," with some confusion, "there would have been no occasion for any one to know anything more of the matter."

Noel saw it all now, and, with the impulse of a lover, immediately shifted the blame from the shoulders of Dulcie to those of her mother. It was clear to him he had been maligned, traduced, blackened to his darling; she had been made to doubt and hate him, to believe him capable of unspeakable villany.

After a pause he said, in a voice of righteous indignation,—

"Then it was you who set her against me and paved the way for another man."

Mrs. Vernon was exceedingly human, and had a considerable temper. After making an enormous sacrifice of feeling to behave fairly and honorably, to be met with this accusation, and to see that Noel held her responsible for all that had occurred, was more than she could bear, and she struck out sharply in return.

"You see," she said, in the quiet voice which those who knew her best most feared, "I could hardly imagine that, after being so much devoted to you and ready to sacrifice everything for your sake, my daughter would, a couple of months later, be equally well disposed to receive the attentions of another man. However," changing her tone abruptly, "the moment that I perceived what was going on, I told Dulcie that she was your wife, and forbade Mr. Temple to see her again."

"And did you tell him the truth?" cried Noel, rather in the tone of a Grand Inquisitor.

"No," replied Mrs. Vernon, striking out again. "I am not given to publishing disgraceful family secrets."

"Disgraceful!" cried Noel.

"Yes," returned Mrs. Vernon, calmly, with an unflinching regard, "*disgraceful!*"

Noel subsided. He knew he had done wrong, and he was not of a temperament to brazen it out. His head sank again, and he resumed his scrutiny of the carpet.

Having got the best of him, Mrs. Vernon was disposed to be merciful.

"Recriminations," she said, "are never of any use. Let

us be practical, and consider the best way out of the dilemma. I will send for Dulcie, and will tell her in your presence that there is only one thing for her to do, which is to submit to the inevitable."

"No! no!" cried Noel. "How can I take her against her will?"

"Then may I ask what you propose?" inquired Mrs. Vernon, impatiently.

"I am going to try to get out to my regiment in India. And then," with a profound sigh, "I shall never trouble her again."

This magnanimous suggestion was very far from meeting with Mrs. Vernon's approval.

"A delightful position, truly, for my daughter!" she exclaimed. "A wife without a husband! No! I will not bear the responsibility of her, and I shall not permit you to shirk yours. If you go to India, she must accompany you."

"Is it my fault?" cried Noel, in accents of deepest reproach. "Would I not give my right hand to win back the affection she felt for me last winter? I love her with all my soul: do you think I want to go away and leave her—to him?"

"If you leave her, it probably will be to him," replied Mrs. Vernon, tartly. "Pray, Mr. Trevor, be a man: make use of your authority: it is perfectly impossible for things to go on in this way. I shall now send for Dulcie. You must insist on your rights, and I shall support you." Before he could say a word, she had rung the bell.

"Ask Miss Dulcie to come to me for a moment," she said blandly to the butler.

A minute later, Dulcie, all unsuspecting, obeyed the summons.

When she caught sight of Noel, she turned ashen pale and trembled in every limb. He rose to meet her, but she did not even greet him by so much as a word. He threw an agonized glance at her mother which said plainly, "You see."

"Dulcie," said Mrs. Vernon, gently, "I have sent for you that we may talk matters over. Last winter, of your own free will and consent, you walked out of my house to marry Mr. Trevor. By the consequences of that step you



must abide. You are his wife, and nothing can alter the fact. The law is on his side, and, if he chooses, he can compel you to live with him; and I am not disposed to deny his position. If you were so much attached to him a few months ago, there is surely no ground for your altered feelings now, as he has done nothing to wound or offend you. Indeed, the severe suffering he has undergone ought to give him a greater claim on your sympathy and affection. I hope that when you have talked the matter over together you will recognize what your duty is. Under the circumstances, I shall not feel justified in keeping you from your husband, and you must not regard this as your home in the future."

Dulcie remained with downcast eyes. She did not speak a word in answer, but sat with a fixed, dogged expression in her face which augured ill for Noel.

After waiting to give her an opportunity of speaking, Mrs. Vernon rose and went to the door.

"I will leave you for a little," she said to Noel. "I hope you will be able to persuade her."

The two young people, left alone together, remained speechless. Dulcie preserved her obstinate expression, and Noel gazed wistfully at her, longing yet not daring to approach her, to take her in his arms, to implore her love, her pity, her forgiveness even, though he had committed no crime against her.

At last he said, in a broken voice,—

"Dulcie, won't you speak to me? You used to love me; and what in heaven's name have I done that you should be so changed?"

Still that dogged, obstinate silence which is more trying than the fiercest invectives and recriminations.

"Dulcie!" and he moved diffidently nearer to her, "won't you speak to me?"

Still silence.

He tried to take her hand, but she dragged it away from him.

"Did I not tell you at Brighton," she cried, roused at last, "what I felt for you? And yet you come here again to persecute and torment me, and to set mamma more against me and make her behave worse to me than she has done already!"

"I never meant to have seen you again," returned Noel. "I was going to India,—I had begun to make arrangements about it,—but your mother wrote and asked me to come. I thought you were still at Brighton. But, now I am here, let me plead with you once again. You are not very happy at home; you and your mother are not on good terms: why—why will you not come with me? Oh, darling! I will devote every hour of my life to making you happy: I will be your slave: you shall not have a wish ungratified if I can help it. Dulcie, my own wife! won't you come to me?"

All the passion of which he was capable was expressed in his voice, but she only shrank from him with a gesture of distaste and disgust.

"I hate you," she said, cruelly; "and if you take me away by force I will kill myself. What pleasure can it be," and she began to whimper, "to persecute and torment a woman who does not care for you? If I were a man I should have too much pride."

"But since you are my wife?—since I have the right to take you?" he answered, his voice hardening for a moment, and a look that frightened her coming into his eyes.

She burst into sobs.

"Then I will kill myself!" she repeated.

Dulcie was the last girl in the world to carry out such a threat,—she was far too great a coward,—but she thought it a good way of intimidating him.

He sat down again, hid his face in his hands, and groaned.

What was he to do? Why had he come here to fight the battle over again? He had gone through all this misery yesterday and had made up his mind about the future, and now he had been compelled to a futile repetition of his wretchedness. Some men might take pleasure in forcing themselves on a reluctant woman: her terror and repugnance might have lent piquancy to the situation in their eyes.

But Noel was not one of these.

## CHAPTER XXI.

DULCIE was buoying herself up with the hopes which Alwyne had inspired in her. He was going to his lawyer; he would leave no stone unturned to find a way of annulling and making void this marriage, and then he would marry her and their life was to be one of ideal bliss. With this thought firmly rooted in her head, Dulcie was scarcely likely to turn anything but a deaf ear to Noel's pleadings. He was her foe; Alwyne her knight and deliverer. Her mother was equally her enemy, trying merely out of spite to force her into the arms of a man she hated. It suited her mother's purpose now to declare the marriage irrevocable, but Dulcie did not believe it.

Suddenly it occurred to her that her best plan would be to propitiate Noel.

"Why should you want to make me miserable?" she said, raising her tearful eyes to his face. "It is not my fault that I no longer care for you. I suppose I did once, but that is all over now. I was told you had deceived me, and that it was not a real marriage, and then I got to hate you. It is no good blaming me; it is not my fault."

Once more the bitterness as of death crept through Noel's heart; once more he roused himself to a supreme effort.

"Say no more!" he cried, hoarsely; then, rising and going towards the door, "I shall never trouble you again." He paused a moment, as though he would have taken some farewell of her; then, changing his mind, he went out.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Vernon returned to the drawing-room to see how matters were progressing. She found Dulcie alone, looking out of the window.

"Well," she asked, sharply, "where is Mr. Trevor?"

"Gone," replied Dulcie, with a sullen air.

"And what have you settled?" inquired her mother.

Dulcie did not answer, and it was only after innumerable questions that Mrs. Vernon elicited what had happened. Then the flood-gates of her wrath were let loose, and she talked to Dulcie in a manner which succeeded in



frightening that obstinate young lady. She declared that the same roof should no longer cover them; that if she disgraced her she would cast her off and never see or speak to her again; she threatened her with all sorts of terrors. At last, frightened herself at the violence of her feelings and words, she rushed from the room and locked herself in her own room, a prey to the strongest emotion she had ever felt.

She was no match for this weak, obstinate girl. What was she to do with her? Plan after plan chased itself through her mind. She thought of sending her to some school, where she would be placed under the strictest surveillance, and where she could neither write to nor receive letters from Alwyne. Then she reflected that by too harsh treatment she might drive Dulcie to the very disgrace she so greatly feared. She resolved to consult Mr. Benson, and ordered the brougham. Driving straight to his chambers, she poured out the whole dreadful story to him. He was amazed and shocked, and seriously concerned to see his usually self-possessed client a prey to such violent emotion.

He was unable to suggest anything. If the young man himself would not assert his privileges and compel his wife to live with him, he thought there was nothing to be done in the matter but to trust to time and to the young lady's coming to her senses. He could not for a moment entertain the shocking possibility of so well-brought-up a girl eloping with Mr. Temple if she were made cognizant of the terrible and disastrous consequences of such a step.

Excellent Mr. Benson, with his calm judicial ideas and words, gave no comfort to the distracted mother in her present frame of mind, and on leaving him she flung herself back in her brougham in a state bordering between intense irritation and despair. For once the self-contained woman felt the absolute necessity of a confidante, and she resolved to tell Mrs. Leslie the truth. On her return she sent at once for her cousin, and, after first making her swear secrecy upon the Bible, she proceeded, to her own intense relief, to pour out the whole dreadful story to her excited and deeply-interested relative.

"I feel," said Mrs. Vernon, in conclusion, "so exasperated against Dulcie that it is impossible for me to go on

living in the same house with her,—at all events for the present. When I remember,” and unwonted tears sprang to her eyes, “how carefully I have brought her up, how I have guarded and watched over her, it is more than I can bear to think of the disgrace she has brought upon me. It must come out sooner or later: I have no doubt the servants already know everything, for I do not place the smallest faith in Morton’s discretion; and, even if she were to be trusted, they must see that something extraordinary is going on.”

Mrs. Leslie was a very good-natured woman, and felt sincerely sorry for her cousin.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?” she cried, eagerly. “Shall I take Dulcie home with me for a few weeks? I promise you Mr. Temple shall not get a chance of seeing her.”

Mrs. Vernon seized eagerly upon her offer.

“Yes, yes; I should be most grateful to you. Anything to get her away from my sight for the present. But may I really trust you?” she asked, recollecting herself. “I know, my dear, that you are very good-natured and rather weak. If Dulcie persuaded you——”

“No, no. I assure you you may trust me,” protested Mrs. Leslie, eagerly. “I will be a perfect dragon. When shall we go? the day after to-morrow? I must give them a day to prepare. I will telegraph at once.”

Dulcie was delighted when she heard that she was to be handed over to Mrs. Leslie. She was quite as anxious to get away from her mother as her mother was to be rid of her, and in her heart she felt sure that she would get her own way with her cousin, and be able to correspond with Alwyne, if not to see him.

Two days later they were on their way to Mrs. Leslie’s pretty little country-house. Mother and daughter had not exchanged a single word in the mean time, nor did they even bid each other good-by. Mrs. Vernon’s exasperation was so deep that she could not bring herself to look at or speak to Dulcie, and when she was once fairly out of the house her mother felt as though a great load were lifted from her heart. Bitter indeed was it to feel the love and care and kindness of so many years requited by defiance and hostility, and one can scarcely wonder if

for the time the mother's natural affection gave way to a feeling very nearly akin to dislike.

Now it was Dulcie's turn to tell her story to Mrs. Leslie, and that kindly-disposed lady was a little shocked to find herself sympathizing in turn with the girl and looking upon her somewhat in the light of a heroine of romance. Not, she gave her clearly to understand, that she meant to allow any interviews with Mr. Temple; besides, she could not imagine, she said, that Dulcie would wish to do anything so wrong as to receive unlawful and compromising attentions. But Dulcie soon talked her into the belief that her marriage with Noel was, through Alwyne's influence, speedily to be made null and void. And then—Why, of course, then, Mrs. Leslie assented, it would be a different matter altogether.

The first thing Dulcie did was, unknown to her cousin, to write and furnish Alwyne with her address, together with the details of her mother's violence and the discomfiture of Noel. She was exceedingly anxious, too, to hear the result of his visit to his lawyer. Alwyne, meantime, was in a state of great perplexity and distress. He had driven with a confident heart to his lawyer's chambers, but had issued thence crestfallen and despairing. For, after hearing all that Alwyne could tell him, the man of law decided that the marriage was legal and binding, in spite of certain irregularities, and that Noel had only to satisfy the court of chancery on the subject of the young lady's fortune, after which he could carry her off as soon as he pleased. And then the lawyer gave him a significant hint about the danger of tampering with a ward in chancery.

Alwyne fumed and fretted himself nearly into a fever. This self-willed young man could not endure to be thwarted, and told himself that he loved Dulcie passionately, madly, and that without her he could not live. His one desire now was to see her; so, when he received her letter, he wrote off by return of post imploring her to manage an interview somehow or other, and promising to tell her all that he had done in the mean time. The all did not amount to much, unless he had reckoned up the ragings and cursings which formed a considerable item in his day's employment. Dulcie, he vowed to himself, must



and should be his. His intentions were strictly honorable: what did he ask better than to make her his wife? but, since Fate would not allow that, why, then—but he did not permit himself to dwell on the alternative.

Dulcie now began to cast about in her mind how the meeting was to be effected. She had become so versed in duplicity that she no longer had any scruples: indeed, she argued to herself that she had been driven to it by her mother's harsh and unkind treatment.

Mrs. Leslie had accepted an invitation for them both the week following to a smart garden-party four miles distant, and was looking forward to it with some little excitement. This would be Dulcie's opportunity. She would feign illness on the day, having previously apprised Alwyne of her intention, only cautioning him not to come unless it should be a thoroughly clear day.

Meantime, she behaved in so exemplary a way that Mrs. Leslie's fears were set at rest, and she wrote most encouraging letters to Mrs. Vernon. Dulcie, she said, seemed extremely happy in the country,—was very amiable and cheerful, and gave her no trouble or anxiety whatever. She appeared quite reconciled to her fate, now she was no longer in fear of being claimed by Mr. Trevor. The day of the garden-party arrived. When Dulcie came down to breakfast, she complained of a slight headache, but made light of it, and declared that a turn in the garden would no doubt put her right. As the morning wore on, however, she became gradually worse, and by lunch-time she had retired to bed, pulled down the blinds, and answered Mrs. Leslie's tender inquiries in a faint and languid voice. She was repeating her little ruse at Nice with perfect success.

This sudden illness was a severe blow to Mrs. Leslie, who had been looking forward to chaperoning her pretty and elegant cousin at the party. The day, too, was lovely,—everything that could be desired.

Mrs. Leslie proposed staying at home to nurse Dulcie, but of this she would not hear, averring that it was simply one of the ordinary headaches to which she was at times subject, and that the only remedy was complete quiet. So at four o'clock Mrs. Leslie drove off in her pony-carriage rather sad and disconsolate. No sooner

had the sound of wheels died away than Dulcie sprang up, put on her prettiest frock, recurled her fringe, and, going down-stairs, placed herself at the drawing-room window, which commanded a view of visitors arriving. Twenty minutes later, she beheld Alwyne coming up the drive, and flew to open the door for him. If his visit could be made without the knowledge of the servants, whose offices were all at the back of the house, so much the better.

A minute later he was in the drawing-room, and she was in his arms. To do Dulcie justice, she really felt that she belonged to Alwyne, and looked upon herself as engaged to him. Her real husband she regarded as a disagreeable detail which she did her best to forget.

Some considerable time was spent in expressions of delight at meeting, and in Dulcie's description of the firmness by which she had baffled her mother and routed Noel: then suddenly she stopped, and, looking eagerly in Alwyne's face, cried,—

“What does your lawyer say?”

This was the moment that Alwyne had dreaded. Evading a direct answer, he renewed his impassioned protestations with increased fervor; but Dulcie, bent on hearing the answer for which she hoped, put them aside, and repeated her question earnestly.

Alwyne hesitated. He could not tell her a lie on the subject, and yet, with any shadow of truth, he could not bid her hope.

Dulcie trembled.

“Do you mean to say,” she whispered, with white lips and a terrified look, “that nothing can be done?”

“Nothing, I am afraid,” replied Alwyne, gloomily, “short of his knocking you down and running away with another woman.” Then, seating himself beside her and taking her hand, he began again hotly to protest his love. He urged all those arguments common to young men when passion gets the better of honor: he talked the specious nonsense about marriages unblessed by the Church but sacred in the sight of God, which has befooled silly women to their undoing; he vowed eternal fidelity; he pictured a Paradise in foreign lands of which they were to be the Adam and Eve: he did and said everything, in fact, that he could think of to persuade Dulcie to run

away with him. But Dulcie's heart had turned to stone within her. She was not of those who think the world well lost for love's sake: she understood quite enough of such matters to realize the fate of a woman who commits the error that Alwyne would have had her commit, and she was the last girl in the world to sacrifice herself in such a manner. She loved Alwyne to the best of her poor ability, but the man did not exist for whom she could bear scorn and contumely. All the imprudences she had been guilty of had been committed in the belief that she was to be Alwyne's wife: never for one instant had the thought of being his mistress crossed her brain. Now despair overcame her: she sat and wept helplessly; whilst he was at his wits' end to console her. She scarcely heard his impassioned words: a dull grievous sense that all was at an end between them overwhelmed her. From henceforth she was widowed and hopeless: she would not be Noel's wife, she could not be Alwyne's.

Alwyne had not said to himself in so many words that he intended to play the villain; he only declared that he could not live without her; and now he was trying to gloss over the wrong and to persuade her that their manifest duty was to live for each other. He did not really anticipate a very hard task in persuading Dulcie, and he quite meant to consider her his wife to the end of their natural lives. But he painted his charming pictures to dull ears. Dulcie kept on thinking and realizing, as he talked, of the agonizing loss she had sustained, but was not moved for one instant to any thought of consenting.

And, just when Alwyne felt that his passionate pleading must conquer, she looked up at him, her eyes dim from much weeping, and said,—

"You must go now, and I shall never see you again."

He sat staring as one stupefied: he did not believe for a moment that she seriously meant what she said.

"You are not in earnest!" he cried.

"I am," she answered, between her sobs. "I would have done anything, sacrificed anything, to be your wife, but you say it is impossible. If you really loved me, you—you would never think of anything else."

Alwyne protested that he did love her; that it was because he loved her he could not give her up; that if



she loved him she would feel, as he did, that life apart was not to be borne.

But here the obstinacy which had baffled Mrs. Vernon and Noel came in, to the confusion of Alwyne, and, though she wept piteously, she was not to be brought to make any concession. She could never love any one else; if ever the time came when she was free, she would be his, but only his lawfully and honorably.

Then Alwyne lost his temper, and reproached her violently, and cried too with rage and disappointment, and swore that she was sending him to the devil, and that he would go there with all possible expedition, and then perhaps she would be sorry.

As she remained unmoved by all this, excepting that she continued to weep copiously, he at last rushed from the room and house, violently banging the door behind him, and frightening the servants, who up to this time had been unconscious of his presence in the house.

By the time her cousin returned from the garden-party, Dulcie was really ill in bed from the effects of her excitement. In the course of the evening Mrs. Leslie was informed that a gentleman had been to see Miss Vernon, and had left the house with a bang that nearly brought the house down. She was seriously alarmed: she had not believed that Dulcie would deceive her; but now she realized that her staying at home was merely a ruse, and trembled lest Mrs. Vernon should discover how she had been outwitted. Well, it should not happen again: she only trusted that nothing serious would come of this.

She went at once to Dulcie, who lay pale and inert, with closed eyes.

"Dulcie," she said, in a low voice, "you have done very wrong to deceive me in this way. What am I to say to your mother if she finds it out?"

The girl's tears fell afresh.

"You need not be afraid," she answered, dolorously. "I shall never see him again. It is all over; and, oh! I am the most miserable girl alive!"

Then Mrs. Leslie felt sorry for her, and pressed her hand kindly and besought her to relate what had happened. And Dulcie replied that there was no longer any hope of a divorce; but she was too proud and too cunning

to reveal what more had passed between them on the subject.

Next day she received an impassioned letter from Alwyne, begging her forgiveness, yet declaring that he could not live without her.

She put his letter in the grate, burned up every morsel with wax matches, and made no reply of any kind to it. After three days came his parting shaft. "You never loved me. You will see to what you have driven me!"

"Good gracious!" cried Mrs. Leslie, a few mornings later, at breakfast, as she was looking over the "Morning Post."

"What?" asked Dulcie, listlessly.

Her cousin handed her the paper with a shocked look, and she read,—

"We are authorized to announce that a marriage has been arranged, and will shortly take place, between Mr. Alwyne Temple, of Blank Court, Blankshire, and Lady Lucy Quickset, second daughter of the Earl and Countess of Hedgerow."

Dulcie's hand trembled; her face was very white as she returned the paper to Mrs. Leslie.

"I suppose it is the best thing he could do," she said, trying to command her voice.

Then she rose, left her unfinished breakfast, and went to her room.

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## CHAPTER XXII.

HERE I must exert the author's privilege of putting back the clock and return for the moment to some of the other characters who have figured in these pages.

We left Mrs. Chandos with a headache; Sir John Chester with a heart-ache, partially relieved for the moment by the unexpected kindness of his lady-love; Mrs. Herbert in the rôle of benevolent godmother, and Mrs. Pierpoint at her wits' end to know what to do with her wilful and turbulent-spirited brother; Mrs. Chester in sore distress of mind and full of fear of the wiles of the wicked siren, and Lilah irritable and peevish to the last degree at what she considered every one's neglect of her.

When Mrs. Vernon and Dulcie left, and Jack took up his quarters at Cannes, her temper became unbearable, and at the end of a week she worried her mother until the poor lady was obliged to consent to taking her back to England. Lilah hated being abroad, she declared; she hated foreigners; she hated the hotel; she even hated the roses and the sunshine, and insisted that, instead of feeling better, she was much, *much* worse, and would very likely die if she were not restored at once to her dear home.

Perhaps, in her secret heart, Mrs. Chester was not sorry for a pretext to get her son away from the dangers and temptations which beset him, and when Lilah passionately and persistently demanded to be taken back to England she wrote to Sir John to acquaint him with his sister's desire.

The letter was a severe blow to Jack, who was basking in sunshine, both actual and metaphorical, at Cannes, and his first impulse was to feel angry with Lilah and even to rebel against having his pleasure curtailed by what he knew to be simply her caprice. Indeed, he had to fight a pretty stern battle with himself before his kind heart and the recollection of his dead father's injunction triumphed over the inclination to refuse submission to her selfish and arbitrary will. But he did triumph, and, with a very sore heart, bade adieu to the two dear ladies at the Villa Blank. In one way he was almost as much attached to Mrs. Herbert as to Reine. She had a wonderful art of making him appear to the best advantage; in her presence he was never tongue-tied nor awkward, and Reine admitted that there was a great deal more in him than she had suspected. She rallied Mrs. Herbert on his devotion to her, and declared that they were so much in love with each other that it was positively embarrassing to be the third person; and Mrs. Herbert did not attempt to deny the impeachment, but merely declared that she would give anything to adopt him as her son, upon which Reine glibly replied that Mia was making use of a very common subterfuge, only that, unfortunately, it was such an old and hackneyed one that it deceived no one. Mrs. Herbert smiled, and protested no more.

When Jack took a sorrowful farewell of her, she prom-



ised to write to him, and bade him be sure to come to London and see her as soon as she returned there. And when, in the following April, she wrote to him announcing her arrival, he put himself in the train the very next day with a joyful heart, and was whirled away to the big city.

Mrs. Herbert received him with open arms; he had a delightful *tête-à-tête* dinner with her that very evening, and, during the three days of his sojourn, spent the greater part of the time in her company.

Reine was in Paris, and likely to remain there for at least another month. Captain Bernard, she informed him with unfeigned pleasure, had at last succeeded in drinking himself to death, and, though she would not buoy Jack up with false hopes, she still encouraged him not to despair, and promised to help him if he would yield implicitly to her guidance.

Mrs. Herbert, who felt unequal to and disliked the trouble of having a large acquaintance, was an extremely stanch and loyal friend to those she liked and took an interest in. "Friendship," she was wont to say, "is the great resource and pleasure of middle age: its ties, unlike those of love, are welcome and pleasant; they are elastic, and will stretch to any extent; it is impossible for them to gall. Friendship is not like love, a sudden instinct that draws together two people who have nothing in common but passion; it must be founded on a similarity of tastes and ideas, on mutual affection and esteem. If my lover does an unworthy or a cruel action, I may hate the act, but be unable to refrain from loving him; if my friend committed it, he would no longer be my friend, for my affection could not blind me to his unworthiness, and, although I might still keep him as an acquaintance, his hold on my heart would be gone. But, unless my judgment had wandered very far astray, I should never have chosen for a friend one who was capable of wounding and outraging my susceptibilities."

Mrs. Herbert, then, having admitted Jack to her friendship, was ready to do everything in her power to help him. She was convinced of the excellence of his heart and temper; his behavior to his mother and sister assured her of that, and his extreme fondness for and goodness to animals was a very strong link between him and his new

friend. All the ideas which he expressed when they conversed intimately together were pleasing to her; he was open, straightforward, honest, abhorred everything mean, cruel, or cowardly, was absolutely devoid of the cheap cynicism which many young men of the day think it smart to affect, either on the subject of women's virtue or the general untrustworthiness of the whole human race. He could believe, admire, and love with a fresh and honest heart; and nothing would have induced Mrs. Herbert to air in his presence any of the advanced views which she sometimes advocated in the presence of a sympathetic listener.

"People who believe everything are happy and enviable," she said. "I think it a positive crime to attempt to take from any one a particle of faith, although in my own eyes it may seem to be only obsolete superstition. I would far rather see a slight lack of intelligence or disinclination to intellectual research in a young man than the brilliant talents which so often go to make an iconoclast of him."

And Jack never doubted for one instant that Mrs. Herbert believed every word of the Bible from beginning to end, but imagined that she deplored as deeply as he did the malign influence of Henry Bertram, which had perverted the ideas of the purest and most innocent woman in the world. He was exceedingly discomposed one day, when seated in Mrs. Herbert's drawing-room, by the butler throwing open the door, and announcing, "Mr. Bertram." Jack had not been five minutes in the room: he could not therefore take his hat and go, but had to remain, and join in conversation with the dangerous atheist. Never had he received a greater shock of surprise than as he sat and listened to Mr. Bertram's conversation, it was so polished, so amusing, so thoroughly good-natured and tolerant on every subject that was mooted, so full of indulgence for the shortcomings of others. It happened that Mrs. Herbert brought up two topics of considerable interest which were then occupying the public mind, and she spoke with a great deal of energy and some fire in denouncing the wrong-doers; but Henry Bertram, whilst not palliating the crimes themselves, made such generous and intelligent allowance for possible circumstances and motives not apparent to those who only saw results, that

he ended by persuading Mrs. Herbert and Jack, who had warmly supported her, to take a more lenient view of the case.

Little by little Jack felt his prejudice melting away, and when Bertram rose to take leave he found himself giving a hearty and cordial hand-shake to the man whom he had looked upon as the arch-enemy of every good and noble sentiment.

"Well," said Mrs. Herbert, smiling, as the door closed upon him, looking up at Jack with a perfect comprehension of his change of feeling, "and what do you think of the monster?"

Jack looked, as he felt, puzzled.

"I never was so surprised in any one," he said, honestly, after a moment's pause. "To hear him talk, he seems such a good chap. If one did not know——"

"You have seen him to-day as he is always," said Mrs. Herbert. "He is the kindest-hearted, most charitable creature living. If he believed every syllable that is written in the Scriptures, he could not more thoroughly act up to the principles they inculcate."

"I can't understand it," remarked Jack, perplexed, and scarcely liking to confess that he had always imagined unbelievers to be wicked, immoral wretches, capable of committing the blackest and most dastardly crimes, and to whom charity and generous impulses were unknown. "Was he always an—atheist?"

"On the contrary. His father was a bishop, and he was brought up most strictly. He declares that the intolerance and narrow-mindedness which he saw in his youth so revolted all the generous instincts of his nature that the moment he was able to emancipate himself he flung off the cloak of religion, and has, according to his own account, been happy ever since."

"I don't understand it," repeated Jack, still puzzled. "I don't see how people can do right if they don't believe in God."

"Henry Bertram says," returned Mrs. Herbert, "that he cannot see why you want a God to teach you that it is wrong to lie and steal and oppress the helpless, when your own natural instincts tell it you so plainly. 'Do you think,' he says, 'I would say to my boy, if I had one,



"Do not lie and steal and be cruel and injure others, because God will damn you and send you to hell if you do"? No! I should say, "Be honest, kind, truthful, just, that you may respect yourself and help your fellow-creatures and make them happier; that when you die you may have been of use in your generation, and have helped the world to progress towards a happier and more enlightened state; that whilst you live you may be able to hold up your head among your fellow-men; that you may keep your heart soft, and not be arrogant and bitter and hard to those who don't think as you do."'"

"Well," said Jack, "but is not that very much what Christianity teaches?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Herbert, "what it ought to teach, and what it is supposed to teach; only with the love of God for its motive. But just look at all the different sects and parties! 'See how these Christians love each other!' Still, for my own part, I can make allowance for a certain amount of bigotry and narrow-mindedness. If you are very much in earnest and believe honestly that there is only one way of being saved, you must nail your colors to the mast and stick to fixed principles. For the most part, tolerance means indifference. If you with all the energy of your heart and soul believe in a certain thing, you cannot say, 'Perhaps it's true, and perhaps it isn't: after all, it does not much matter.'"

Here another visitor was announced, and Jack took his leave without having had an opportunity of saying a word about Reine.

In the interests of her favorite, Mrs. Herbert thought it desirable to make the acquaintance of Jack's mother and sister, and Fortune was not long in favoring her with an opportunity. Lilah was more delicate than ever, and Mrs. Chester brought her to London to consult an eminent physician. When they had been three or four days in town, Mrs. Herbert, after ascertaining that a call from her would be acceptable, paid her visit late in the afternoon. The Chesters were staying in apartments, as Lilah disliked the noise of a hotel. Mrs. Herbert found them in tribulation: the chimney smoked; the landlady was disobliging; Lilah was in a state of extreme nervous irritability. Mrs. Herbert, who was not, as a rule, fond of strangers or

of being put out of her way, took pity on the two helpless ladies, and, having also an eye to Jack's interest, insisted positively that they should give up their rooms and come to her comfortable house next day, and, in spite of Mrs. Chester's protestations, would take no denial. The result was admirable. Lilah had never been so happy and comfortable before. Mrs. Chester was weighed down by gratitude, and Mrs. Herbert won in the mother and daughter two admiring and devoted friends. She was obliged to promise a return visit to them at their country home, and this led to an arrangement which gave pleasure to all parties.

The dower-house on the estate was let, but the tenant was in the habit of travelling during July, August, and September, and subletting the house for these three months if a desirable occupant could be found. The house was charmingly furnished, and had a lovely garden. Mrs. Herbert's custom was to rent a place in the country during the summer and autumn, and the Chester family implored her to come and take up her abode at the dower-house.

Mrs. Chester was aware that Mrs. Herbert was the friend of Mrs. Chandos, but, having heard no mention of that lady for several months, had ceased to feel any anxiety or misgivings about her. Mrs. Herbert had not once mentioned Reine's name in the presence of either Mrs. Chester or Lilah, and, before they came to see her, had, with a slight qualm as though she were guilty of some treachery, locked away the beautiful miniature of Reine which always stood on her writing-table along with the handsomely-bound volumes of poems which were also wont to occupy a prominent place in her boudoir. Truth to tell, she and Jack entered into a little conspiracy which would have made Reine furious had she known it, to avoid all mention of her, and of her sayings and doings, before his relatives.

Reine always spent at least a month with Mrs. Herbert at her summer resort, and Jack, with a beating heart, looked forward to the time when his idol would be even at his very gates.

It was June before Mrs. Chandos came to London and took up her residence in her own pretty little house. She

had almost forgotten Jack's existence, but when she met him at Mrs. Herbert's she behaved very kindly and cordially to him, and rallied her friend more than ever about her latest infatuation. Mrs. Herbert laid down the strictest rules for Jack's guidance, and, by repeating them over and over again, succeeded in impressing upon him the absolute necessity of following them if he ever hoped for success. True, she could not exercise the control over his eyes that she did over his tongue, but Reine did not appear to remark his occasional glances of devotion, and, as long as he refrained from putting his feelings into words, was quite willing to be friendly with him. Indeed, she took a considerable liking to him, and he was often allowed to be in her company when she and Mrs. Herbert were together.

Henry Bertram not unfrequently made a fourth at dinner or for a party to the play, and when Jack had fully convinced himself that this pleasant infidel had no designs on Reine's heart he became immensely attached to him, and Mr. Bertram heartily reciprocated the young fellow's good feeling, being thoroughly pleased with his honest, open, and guileless nature. Mrs. Herbert had even confided her plot to him for the bringing together of this pair, and he, when he had seen and narrowly observed Jack, was by no means inclined to oppose or throw cold water upon it.

He was sincerely attached to Reine; he knew that she was an unhappy woman, and he was ready to welcome any scheme that might make her life healthier and happier. He was always trying to combat that tendency to morbid feeling which was the chief cause of her discontent and despondency, and he agreed with Mrs. Herbert that a lively and adoring young husband would be an excellent antidote to gloomy and pessimistic thoughts.

Reine, acute though her instincts usually were, did not suspect the trap that was being laid for her by her devoted friends: the idea would have seemed to her so preposterous and absurd that it did not occur to her to entertain it. She was in a happier mood than she had been for a long time: the death of Captain Bernard was an unspeakable relief to her; she was no longer haunted by the fear of meeting him, or of hearing some disgraceful story about



him. She now realized that she was absolutely free,—the mistress of her own fate and life as far as any mortal can be. She consented willingly to spend some time with Mrs. Herbert at the dower-house, being in blissful ignorance of the fear and horror which she inspired in the maternal breast of Mrs. Chester.

During her stay in town she saw a good deal of Mrs. Vernon, who was in a really pitiable state of wretchedness and embarrassment. She had conceived a positive dislike to her daughter, and declared it to be impossible that they should live any longer under the same roof. Knowing Reine's discretion, it was an immense relief to her to discuss the miserable affair, and Reine sympathized very sincerely with her aunt. It was out of the question, Mrs. Vernon declared, that she should continue to go about with Dulcie as though she were a marriageable girl; and to live in a state of constant suspicion of some new treachery and duplicity would be intolerable.

Mrs. Vernon was beyond measure indignant with Noel for his cowardice; but he had sailed for India, and was out of reach of her remonstrances or anger. She lived in daily fear, she declared, of Dulcie's folly bringing her into irretrievable disgrace, and it was with heartfelt thankfulness that she read the announcement in the "Post" of Alwyne's intended marriage. But until it was an accomplished fact she averred that she should not know a moment's peace, since it might only be a fresh ruse of the pair, who seemed equally devoid of honorable instincts, to throw dust in her eyes and the eyes of the world at large in order that they might carry out their own abominable designs.

Mrs. Herbert was acquainted with the Hedgerows, and Reine elicited from her, without any breach of her aunt's confidence, that the engagement was a *bona-fide* one, that the family were pleased with it, and that Alwyne appeared to be a very devoted and attentive lover.

Dulcie remained for the present with Mrs. Leslie, as her mother had no desire to see her, and Mrs. Vernon employed all the tact she possessed to account to her friends for her daughter's absence from London in the very height of the season.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

MRS. HERBERT took possession of the dower-house early in July. Reine was not to join her until a month later, having promised to spend some weeks with another intimate friend in Hampshire.

Mrs. Herbert, who never liked to be quite alone, especially in the country, took with her as companion *pro tem.* the daughter of an old friend whom stern vicissitude had compelled to earn the bitter bread of dependence. Her experiences had been peculiarly unfortunate, her lot having fallen among vulgar and tyrannical people, and she could, although she rarely did, relate stories of the treatment she had suffered which would hardly have seemed credible to ordinary people. There are hundreds—let us hope thousands—of houses where governesses and companions are treated with kindness and courtesy, but there are others where the behavior of the employers is such as they would not dare to show a servant, on pain of being left to wait upon themselves. In these days, when thousands of gently-nurtured girls have no alternative but to earn their own bread, when the market is so terribly overstocked with the commodity of unemployed gentlewomen, it is a case either of starving or enduring; and if *ladies* are cruel and overbearing the unhappy dependant must submit, or run the chance of being for months without a situation, perhaps suffering absolute want.

Mrs. Herbert, who had been very kind to Grace's family, invited her to spend a month at the dower-house. She was a tall, graceful girl, not exactly pretty, but exceedingly ladylike, with beautiful hands and feet and an unmistakable air of breeding. She adored Mrs. Herbert, and would have done anything in the world for her. She used to say, a dozen times in the day,—

"You must please not be so kind to me, or it will make the change so dreadful when I go away."

Mrs. Herbert was delighted with the dower-house. The present possessor, seeing what a desirable tenant he had secured in her, left out all his china, pictures, and pretty

knick-knacks, and, as she said, it was quite like going to one's own home. There was a wealth of flowers in the garden and conservatories, and Grace used to devote a great deal of her time to arranging them in the big china bowls; for Mrs. Herbert loved to have flowers about her, and scouted the old-fashioned idea of their making a room unhealthy.

Sir John came every day to the house, under the pretence of wanting to know if she was quite comfortable, and if there was nothing he could do for her, and seemed quite disappointed that his good will was not put to the proof.

There was constant friendly intercourse between the hall and the dower-house. Lilah took a great fancy to Grace, who read, sang, and talked to her, and felt a genuine pleasure in lightening the burden of the poor little sufferer.

After ten happy days Mrs. Herbert was sensible of the first crumpled rose-leaf. She saw that poor Grace was fast falling in love with Sir John, and it troubled her seriously. "How can one ever be sure, with the best intentions in the world," she said to herself, "that one is doing a kindness? I have brought Gracie here thinking to give her a month's rest and happiness, and it is quite likely that I shall be the means of causing her the worst heartaches she has ever had in her life, poor child!"

For Jack, with his natural kind and refined instincts, behaved with much more attention to Grace than he would have done to most girls, on account of her dependent position, and it would have been quite pardonable on her part if she fancied that he was attracted towards her. Truth to tell, the young man was so anxious to be alone with Mrs. Herbert to talk about his beloved that he was mortally afraid of showing that the presence of a third person was irksome; and so, whenever Grace appeared, he was at great pains to conceal his chagrin, and in the goodness of his heart a little overacted his part.

Mrs. Herbert reflected seriously upon the situation, and, after some heart-burning, came to a decision. Something must be done before it was too late, and she felt that the wisest course would be to confide the real facts to Grace. With her usual tact, she selected her opportunity when



they were sitting together in the twilight after dinner, reflecting that the dusk would conceal any emotion that her recital might bring to the girl's cheeks and eyes.

She began by praising Sir John, his thoughtful kindness, his manliness, his good looks,—for she thought him good-looking, although he had no very strict claim to being called handsome. By the vivacity and ardor with which Grace agreed to and echoed her encomiums, a not very subtle person would have got an inkling of the truth, and, for once, it was rather a source of pain to Mrs. Herbert to have her praises so eagerly assented to.

“Who would think,” she went on, almost hating herself for the stab she was inflicting, “that Sir John was the victim of a hopeless love?”

A moment's silence followed, in which the last speaker acutely felt what her listener was suffering.

“It is a strict secret,” Mrs. Herbert continued, with an effort, “and if I confide it to you you must promise faithfully not to divulge it, nor to let him think you have any suspicion of it.”

“Of course,” answered poor Grace, in a hard, strained voice that she had the utmost difficulty in controlling, and a pang went through her heart as though the consciousness of a dire misfortune had come to her. She had not thought, imagined, hoped anything, and yet this revelation came upon her like a thunder-clap.

Mrs. Herbert went on with her story in as natural a voice as she could command, and Grace listened whilst the light waned and her own heart grew dark and chill too. She had once seen Reine and admired her immensely; but now she felt dislike of her growing in her breast, and in little more than a fortnight she, the poor despised governess and companion, would be ousted from all this happiness, and the beautiful, gifted, fortunate Mrs. Chandos, who already (as Grace thought) had all this world's good things, would be queening it in a Paradise, with the man who possessed every manly grace and virtue for her slave. Oh, how cruel the world is! how cruel life is for some people! and how others are heaped with gifts and blessings, with love and happiness! At this moment Grace would have scoffed had any one told her that Reine Chandos was a less happy woman than herself.

Mrs. Herbert's tale was told. The room had grown quite dark, and silence fell upon the pair.

"I think we will not have lights just yet," said Mrs. Herbert, after a long pause. "I feel a little sleepy," she added, settling herself back in her chair; and Grace went away into the garden, and, sitting on a bench, looked at the vast heaven and the silver stars, and marvelled at the cruelty of her lot, until her sight became dim and misty with tears.

Neither that night nor at any future time was the subject recurred to either by her or Mrs. Herbert. Poor Grace had an intuition why the story had been told her, and was careful to let her friend see that she perfectly understood and appreciated the motive of Sir John's kindness to her and was in no way misled by it.

As August drew near, and the time for Reine's visit approached, both Jack and Mrs. Herbert felt a little uneasy. Each knew full well what a shock the news would be to Mrs. Chester, and each had a sense of guilt at their conspiracy and of fear lest it should be detected. Mrs. Herbert had promised to broach the news, and rarely had she felt more uncomfortable at a task. To her intense relief, a circumstance altogether unexpected came to her aid, and she was not slow to take advantage of it.

Mrs. Chester had written two or three times to Mrs. Vernon during the last few months, pressing her to bring Dulcie and pay them the long-promised visit, and at last Mrs. Vernon had accepted. Alwyne Temple's marriage had taken place, and there was no longer anything to be dreaded from the thought of meeting him. To be alone with her daughter was insupportable to Mrs. Vernon, and she had therefore accepted several invitations to country-houses, and fixed the beginning of August for her visit to the Chesters.

Mrs. Chester came down to the dower-house to announce the news to her friend, and Mrs. Herbert at once rejoined, with great *aplomb*,—

"That will be charming. I have just written to Mrs. Vernon's niece, begging her to come to me. If she accepts, we shall be quite a family party."

Mrs. Herbert spoke with so innocent an air that poor, guileless Mrs. Chester was completely taken in by it; but

the news was a severe shock to her, although she did her best to conceal what she felt. The one woman on earth she feared at her very gates! The poor lady went home, fell on her knees, and prayed as earnestly that her dear son might be delivered from Reine's wiles and snares as though Mrs. Chandos had been the Scarlet Lady *in propria persona*.

Jack was at immense pains to hide his jubilation, but his heart was full of joy, and he seemed to tread on air.

Mrs. Herbert was looking joyfully forward to Reine's arrival, but a pang shot through her kind heart every time she thought of Grace's departure and the sad change her life would undergo when she left the dower-house. It was an immense relief to her when, one morning, Mrs. Chester came to make the proposition that Miss Waltham should be offered the post of companion to Lilah for three months. The idea was Lilah's own: she had been seriously concerned at the thought of losing her new friend, and it had occurred to her that it would be delightful to have Grace all to herself, not as a visitor, but as her own chattel and apanage. Mrs. Chester had demurred a little at first to the idea of taking a new inmate into the family; but Lilah had appealed to Jack, and he had heartily approved of and concurred in it. At all events, there could be no harm in trying it.

Grace caught eagerly at the proposal. Like her sex, she clung to the presence of the beloved, even though she knew that it would cause her infinite suffering.

Mrs. Vernon and Dulcie arrived two or three days before Reine. It was impossible for the Chesters not to remark how much changed Dulcie was since the winter. She looked sad; she made little effort to talk; and though she forced a stereotyped smile when spoken to, it was so manifestly artificial as to inspire no idea of pleasure or mirth in the beholder. Dulcie was, indeed, utterly miserable. What affection she had she had given to Alwyne: his very masterfulness had exercised a potent charm over her weak nature; it had been happiness to submit to him and to his influence. The memory of Noel filled her with fear and repugnance. A sense of dislike to her mother overspread her heart. She felt with indignant revolt that the latter had no pity for her, no sympathy with her grief;



that, if she could, she would at any moment force her into the arms of Noel; that she would gladly welcome anything that would relieve her of her, Dulcie's, presence. This was quite true. Mrs. Vernon felt nothing but impatient scorn of her daughter. Dulcie's presence had become wellnigh intolerable to her: the fact of having to take about a seemingly marriageable daughter under false pretences was an odious fraud which she beyond expression hated being compelled to connive at.

Until Alwyne's marriage had become an accomplished fact, Dulcie had not seriously believed that it would take place. She thought he meant to frighten and to punish her: she was so certain that he loved her, she could not believe he would willingly place an insuperable barrier between them. When she read the announcement of his marriage in the paper, it had broken whatever of heart and spirit she possessed.

Although all the members of the Chester family remarked the change in Dulcie, it was only sharp little Lilah who connected it with Alwyne's marriage. She had seen at Nice that Dulcie was in love with her cousin, and had declared that Mrs. Vernon only left them and returned to England in order to get rid of Alwyne; and, although she was extremely puzzled to know why so eligible a young man had been rejected by Dulcie's mother, she felt certain in her own mind that the change in Dulcie was to be attributed to Alwyne's marriage. She spoke purposely of Alwyne and his bride in Dulcie's presence, watching her the while with lynx eyes, and she noted, with a certain pride in her own discrimination, that a faint color came to the girl's cheeks and that she showed some slight embarrassment.

Lilah, with a desire of offering consolation to the victim of her scalpel, spoke in a disparaging way of Lady Lucy, declared that she was fast and horsey and that there was no doubt she had a temper, in which case she and Alwyne would soon come to blows, as he had the very worst temper in the world and was so spoiled and selfish that he could not bear the least contradiction. Indeed, she, Lilah, pitied any poor wretch who had the misfortune to be his wife.

Dulcie made no remark in answer, although she bitterly

resented Lilah's words in her heart ; but she had always looked upon her as a peevish, sharp-tongued, disagreeable little creature.

Sir John did his utmost to amuse and cheer Dulcie. Always kindly and benevolently disposed, he was now so brimful of happiness that he burned to make every one about him happy too, and could not tolerate the idea of her being miserable. So much attention, indeed, did he show her that Mrs. Chester's hopes began to revive and poor Grace suffered keen pangs of jealousy, thinking that perhaps after all Mrs. Herbert had been mistaken in supposing his heart to be given to Mrs. Chandos.

But this impression did not last a moment after she had seen him in Reine's presence. Then she knew beyond a doubt that Mrs. Herbert had told her the simple truth. There was an expression in his eyes, a ring in his voice, when he spoke to Mrs. Chandos, that would have betrayed him to the merest tyro in love's ways. In spite of Mrs. Herbert's warnings, he could not conceal the delight he felt in Reine's presence. In London it had been different ; but now that she was here, here in his own house, he felt as though he had a new prerogative to love her and to be happy. Whether Reine read what was written so legibly in his face or no, she made no sign, but treated him with frank kindness and without a shade of embarrassment. She was in excellent spirits, delighted to be once more with Mrs. Herbert, of whom she was exceedingly fond, charmed with the dower-house, in unusually good health and spirits, and quite in tune to enjoy the simple pleasures of the country. Both she and Mrs. Herbert loved to be in the air and were fond of driving, and there were plenty of pretty drives in the neighborhood.

Jack was constantly at the house, and Reine still affected to laugh at her friend and to rally her upon his attention ; and, as Mrs. Herbert wished to give him every opportunity of being in Reine's presence, she smilingly accepted the impeachment.

"There is one thing, my dear boy," she said confidently to Jack, for by this time they were on the most familiar and friendly terms,—*"There is one thing that I positively dare not do for you, and that is to leave you alone with Reine. If I did, her suspicions would be aroused at once:*

so, much as I hate being third, I must for the present continue to play that obnoxious part."

Of course Jack had the good manners to assure her that never, under any circumstances, could her society be aught but delightful; and she smiled, and said that perhaps some day she might be able to convince him to the contrary, and that she ardently desired the advent of that time.

He was compelled to make constant pretexts for being in the company of his two dear ladies, and, to that end, suggested frequent picnics and excursions, and, though this form of entertainment was not especially grateful to either Mrs. Herbert or Reine, they were amiable enough to sacrifice themselves with a good grace to the general weal.

So two or three young men and maidens from the neighborhood were bidden to swell the party, and one of the former, an extremely eligible youth, fell forthwith desperately in love with Dulcie, to her extreme disconcertment as well as to the annoyance of her mother. To be ambitious and to have a pretty daughter whom various men of position and fortune were burning to make their own, and to have her secretly married to an obscure young soldier with whose lot she declined to cast in her own, was a dispensation so unbearable that one can scarcely wonder if it drove poor Mrs. Vernon to the verge of madness.

And presently a new complication ensued. Alwyne, whose place was some thirty miles distant from his cousin's, wrote to say that he and his wife had arrived there, and would drive over in his phaeton, sending on horses half-way, and spend a couple of nights at the hall.

Mrs. Chester, on receipt of this communication, felt slightly embarrassed. Remembering what had happened in the winter, she thought it probable that a meeting might neither be agreeable to the Vernons nor to Alwyne. She called her son into council.

"Alwyne knows that the Vernons are here," answered Jack. "I was writing to him the other day, and mentioned it. I dare say it is just a little bit of bravado on his part, to show them that he did not take his rejection at all to heart; but, of course, before we invite him and his wife here we must find out whether Mrs. Vernon and her daughter object to meeting him."



So Mrs. Chester put the matter as delicately as possible to Mrs. Vernon, and that lady, with a bland and serene face, declared that it would give them great pleasure to meet Mr. Temple and to make Lady Lucy's acquaintance.

In her secret heart she did not like the idea at all. Believing Alwyne to be absolutely unprincipled and her daughter idiotically weak, she felt no certainty whatever as to the result of a meeting between them. She determined, however, to keep Argus-eyes upon both of them, and, as the visit was to be so short, she hardly thought much danger could accrue from it. In the rôle of bridegroom, too, Alwyne would be compelled, for decency's sake, to show a great deal of attention to his bride.

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

DULCIE did not hear of the approaching visit until that evening at dinner, when Lilah made allusion to it.

Her heart fainted within her: she turned waxen white, and could not eat another morsel. No one looked at her or seemed to remark her discomposure, and as soon as dinner was over she went to her room. She felt as though she would rather do anything in the world than meet Alwyne under these new circumstances, now that it was assured beyond all assurance that henceforth he could be nothing to her or she to him.

Her marriage in the registry-office had seemed an unequal kind of thing which might by some means or other be got over; but he had been married in church before the eyes of the world, and his ties were irrevocable, knitted by the Church, by law, by society. How would he meet her? Did he know she was here? Surely not, or he would hardly have been so cruel as to put her to the pain of seeing him under these changed and hopeless circumstances. Even now she clung to the belief that he must still love her, and had only married from pique or despair. She sat a long time at her open window, looking out at the moonlit garden, but seeing nothing, thinking only her miserable thoughts, until a tap came at the door, and

Grace asked softly whether she would not come down and join in a round game.

She did not dare refuse the summons, but accompanied Grace to the drawing-room and took the chair that had been placed for her next Sir John. She played mechanically, like one in a dream; but Jack insisted on her banking with him, directed her play, and did his best to avert attention from her obviously *distracte* manner. Her mother glanced at her with covert scorn and resentment, incensed at her folly in wearing her heart so plainly on her sleeve.

Mrs. Vernon rarely now saw or spoke to Dulcie in private, but she took occasion that evening to follow her to her room.

"I suppose," she said, in a hard voice, "that you are not particularly anxious to give people the impression that you are pining for Mr. Temple: therefore it would be as well in future to exercise a little more control over yourself, and not to wear the willow quite so plainly as you did to-night. If you have any self-respect, you will not, when he arrives, give him the gratification of seeing how mortified you are by his marriage."

Dulcie neither looked at nor replied to her mother; a sullen resentment overspread her heart; and, after a moment's pause, Mrs. Vernon turned and left the room.

Alwyne had informed his aunt by letter that he and Lady Lucy would arrive in time for dinner. They were a little late, and every one went to dress except Mrs. Chester and Sir John, who waited to receive them. Dulcie thus escaped meeting Alwyne until the party assembled for dinner. Mrs. Herbert and Mrs. Chandos came from the dower-house, and two men from the neighborhood had been asked, to lessen the great preponderance of the fair sex.

The line which Alwyne had selected was very soon manifest. He greeted Dulcie as though she were the merest acquaintance, Mrs. Vernon with distant hauteur, and, having once exchanged with her the necessary greeting, never looked at nor spoke to her again during the evening.

He was delightful to the ladies from the dower-house, pleasantly patronizing to his aunt and Lilah, but his par-

ticular attentions were reserved for his bride, of whom it seemed as though he could not make enough. He scarcely took his eyes off her; if he was not speaking to her, he brought her name unceasingly into the conversation; his directions to the servants about "her ladyship's" wants and comforts were a little more ostentatious than was compatible with good taste.

As for Lady Lucy, she accepted his attentions with perfect good humor, if a little cavalierly, and chatted away after her own somewhat slangy fashion with great fluency and amiability. She was rather pretty, and perfectly unaffected; had her hair cut short like a boy, laughed rather loudly, and talked a great deal to Sir John about horses, racing, and equine matters generally.

After dinner, Alwyne hovered about her, insisted on her singing, stood by the piano in rapt attention during the somewhat mediocre performance, frowning if he heard the smallest whisper among the company. He was looking very handsome and distinguished, and his manner, a trifle dictatorial and self-important to every one else, was charming to his wife.

Sharp-eyed Lilah was perhaps the only one who quite saw through him.

"I think," she confided afterwards to Grace, "that Alwyne is more detestable than ever. That was his put-on manner to-night, and was only done to aggravate Dulcie Vernon and to make out that he did not care two straws about her having refused him. So snobbish of him, too, to keep on about 'her ladyship,' letting every one see how proud he is of having married an earl's daughter."

Grace, who only saw in Alwyne a very handsome young man, devoted to his wife, thought Lilah very unjust; but she did not say so, having already discovered that it was unproductive of comfort or harmony to contradict the little tyrant.

Poor Dulcie was cut to the heart. She suffered all that Alwyne's revengeful spirit desired that she should suffer; his manner convinced her that she was ousted from his heart, and that the devotion she had once inspired was transferred to his wife. Yet, she thought bitterly, since he was so happy and triumphant, he might have had a



kind word for her: he need not have treated her with such marked and cruel indifference. She wept bitterly far into the night; she was suffering the most poignant anguish she had ever felt; and, for the first time, the thought dawned across her that she too had been cruel, and had caused bitter and unnecessary pain to Noel by her heartless treatment of him.

The next day there was a picnic, and a tolerably large party assembled at the hall about mid-day. Dulcie's latest admirer was of the party, and testified his love-lorn condition in the most ingenuous manner.

Now, strange as it may seem, Alwyne, whose one object had hitherto been to evince in the most marked manner his absolute indifference to Miss Vernon, was vastly displeased to see the post which he had so contemptuously disclaimed any wish for, occupied by some one else. It quite distracted him from his attention to his wife, and produced a disagreeable effect on his temper, making him perverse and contradictory and disposed to quarrel with every suggestion made for the general welfare and pleasure.

Sir John drove Dulcie, Lilah, Grace, Dulcie's admirer,—Mr. Lister,—and another man, in the break, and, imagining that the devoted bridegroom would not like to be parted from his adored one, had arranged that they should drive in Alwyne's phaeton. Lady Lucy insisted on taking the reins, and during the greater part of the way Alwyne grumbled and found fault with her coachmanship and exhibited himself in an altogether different fashion from that he had done the previous evening. But Lady Lucy seemed absolutely indifferent to his ill humor, and simply laughed at him and bade him "shut up" and not be a brute.

During the *al fresco* luncheon Alwyne's displeasure increased at seeing the slavish attentions of George Lister to Dulcie. She accepted them gently enough, for she was so abjectly miserable that her one thought was to conceal her pain from the eyes of those present; and she therefore feigned an interest in his conversation which she was very far from feeling. By the end of luncheon Alwyne's wrath had reached boiling-point, and, with his usual wilful disregard of what any one might think, he approached

Dulcie and invited her to walk with him to see some view in the neighborhood. Lister, however, showed no intention of quitting her side: so, after they had walked a few paces, Alwyne turned sharply round upon him and said,—

“My dear chap, I dare say you know the old saying that ‘two is company.’ Miss Vernon is an old friend of mine, and I have not spoken to her for an age; whereas you have had the privilege, no doubt, every day lately. Perhaps you will let me escort her now, and when I bring her back I promise not to interfere with your claims.”

Lister looked furious.

“If Miss Vernon wishes to be rid of my company, I will go at once,” he said, appealing eagerly to Dulcie; but she remained silent with downcast eyes. He was therefore compelled to take her silence as a proof that his society was not welcome; and, after a moment’s pause, he turned on his heel, desperately vexed and wounded.

Sir John and Reine, who were both witnesses of this little episode, felt extremely uncomfortable on Lady Lucy’s account, and proceeded in concert to make themselves agreeable to her in order to divert her attention from her husband’s strange behavior, and Mrs. Herbert, with quick intuition, ably seconded them. But Lady Lucy was evidently not one whit disconcerted or displeased at Alwyne’s absence, and laughed and chatted away in the best of spirits. Lister attached himself to Lilah and Grace, as being the nearest approach to the rose, and the other young men and maidens paired off and were soon lost in the sylvan arcades. Mrs. Chester and Mrs. Vernon were not of the party, having thankfully relegated to the ladies from the dower-house the duties of chaperonage.

Now that Alwyne had carried off Dulcie in triumph, he did not appear to have very much to say to her. She was trembling in every limb; her eyes were averted from him; her embarrassment was evident. Remarking his power over her, Alwyne received the necessary stimulus to his revengeful instincts.

“I thought,” he said, in a tone of cruel banter, “that I was doing Lister a kindness in taking you away from him. You know it’s deuced hard on men to go on losing their

hearts to you under the impression that you are"—"fair game," he was going to say, but changed it to "eligible. What has become of Mr.—? I forget his name; and how much longer are you going to keep him in the background?"

The brutal bad taste of his remark was less obvious to Dulcie than his cruelty. Tears trembled on her lashes and fell: he saw them, but they only goaded him on to an increased desire to hurt her.

"It really is an infernal shame," he continued. "I suppose you intend to let this wretched devil Lister break his heart about you. Do you mean to tell him the truth, or shall you wait until Mr. What's-his-name pounces upon him from behind a tree or somewhere? By Jove! you made me miserable enough, I know; and if I had not met Lucy, who's the dearest girl in the world, I might have blown my brains out, or gone to the devil, or God knows what!"

Dulcie had very little dignity, but she was stung into replying,—

"It is most fortunate that you did meet her."

"Yes," he said, "it is. But I don't suppose such luck is in store for every man; and I do say, as I said before, that it is an infernal shame your going about sailing under false colors. Of course as long as a man does not see or know of any other fellow hanging about you, he always thinks he has a chance."

"I have never given Mr. Lister the smallest encouragement," cried Dulcie, indignantly.

"I don't know what you call encouragement," retorted Alwyne. "I should call your behavior to him at lunch very decided encouragement. Perhaps you don't consider that you encouraged me?"

Dulcie was silent. She felt unutterably miserable: she dared not say to him what was in her heart: "You know that I loved you, and that I hoped to be your wife in time." He was married: it was no use raking up the past or confessing her humiliation. If he could forget so soon, it ill beseemed her to show that she remembered.

But Alwyne's appetite for revenge grew in exercising it, and he went on.

"Where is your husband now?" he asked.



Even a worm will turn. Dulcie, who had no wit, no readiness whatever at cut and thrust in repartee, was goaded beyond endurance.

"If you only brought me here to say these things to me," she cried, "I will go back to the rest of the party. You are married; you are happy: leave me and my misery alone!"

"Oh, by all means," returned Alwyne, in a lofty tone. "I beg your pardon: I will not presume to mention your affairs again. Still, as we have come so far, we may as well go on and see the view that I was supposed to show you." And for the rest of the way he discoursed entirely about his wife and her family, the delightful trip they had made in their honeymoon, the beauties of his own place, his horses, his dogs,—on everything, in fact, that tended to his own self-exaltation and to show Dulcie what a loss she had sustained in him. Their *tête-à-tête* lasted some three-quarters of an hour. Never had Dulcie experienced such bitter mortification. She was not shrewd enough to see that, had Alwyne felt the indifference he professed, he would not have been at such pains to testify it to her, but would rather have been disposed to be the more kind and considerate.

The pair rejoined their companions in very different frames of mind. Alwyne was jubilant in the extreme: the gratification of his revenge had warmed his heart and made him almost boisterously good-humored. He threw himself down at his wife's feet, called her "little woman," "darling," and various other endearing epithets, and she received his advances with the same good-tempered indifference with which she had taken his absence.

As for Dulcie, she could not command her face to any show of cheerfulness, and after what Alwyne had said she was positively terrified of appearing to give the smallest encouragement to George Lister. And suppose, she thought, Alwyne betrayed her, and the fact of her secret marriage were to get abroad. She had no guarantee that he would not confide her dreadful secret to his wife, and she no doubt would tell every one, and perhaps make a jest of it. Then she, Dulcie, would be eternally disgraced and undone. Why had she not taken advantage of being alone with him to implore him to keep her secret? She

must do so yet; but when would she have another opportunity?

This thought entirely engrossed her mind, so that she did not even hear what George Lister was saying to her, or take any account of the tender reproaches he was pouring into her ear. At first on her return with Alwyne he had tried to sulk with her, but, finding that she did not even appear to remark this exhibition of his resentment, he abandoned it, and endeavored to appeal to her better feelings. Both tactics were equally unsuccessful. He therefore, after the nature of his kind, waxed more deeply in love at every fresh proof of her indifference.

How should she procure another interview with Alwyne in order to throw herself upon his clemency and to entreat his silence?

This thought occupied her the whole afternoon.

It had been arranged that all the members of the picnic-party should dine at the hall that evening, and after they had boiled their kettle and drunk smoky tea with apparent relish they prepared to return home in the same order in which they had come. Dulcie was not near enough to Alwyne to exchange a word with him.

As she was descending to the drawing-room before dinner, she saw him on the stairs in front of her.

"Mr. Temple," she said, in a low voice, accelerating her speed.

He turned.

"I must speak to you," she whispered, in a hurried, agitated voice, coming up with him.

At this moment steps were heard in the corridor above them.

"I will meet you in the garden after dinner," he said. "By the limes. I will go out the moment we leave the dining-room."

Dulcie would have demurred, but there was no time. And, after all, she did not much mind how or where she met him, so long as she could prevail upon him to keep her secret.

When the ladies left the dining-room she went to her room to wait until it was time to keep her tryst.

The evening was lovely. The long twilight had not yet faded out; there were still rosy gleams athwart the

western sky. Presently she crept down-stairs, and, going out through the French window of the morning-room, took her way to the limes. There was a bench beneath the largest of them, and there she seated herself and waited with what patience she might for the coming of her whilom lover, now turned into a bitter and revengeful foe.

Poor Dulcie! all joy and hope had gone out of her life: she saw nothing before her but wretchedness and despair.

A step on the gravel, and Alwyne, flushed, triumphant, handsome, stood before her. He was a little excited at the situation; he had a pleasant sense that he was doing something a trifle hazardous and not quite right, and he had, besides, a delightful feeling that he was scoring over Lister. He had come with no wrong intent of any sort, but, as he looked at Dulcie, her fairness, which was of the type he most admired, smote him with a sudden sense of loss, and he felt something of the old tenderness for her creeping back to his heart.

"Well," he said, in a softened voice, with signs of melting in his handsome eyes, "I have come. What can I do for you?"

And with that he sat down on the bench beside her, and, swayed by sudden impulse, took her hand. Her one thought was to propitiate him, and she did not attempt to draw it away. She had so utterly relinquished all idea that he cared for her that his action was without any significance.

She looked at him with appealing eyes: her voice faltered and trembled. The evidence of her weakness touched all his senses. Lucy had no weaknesses.

"Oh," she almost gasped, "I implore you to have pity on me and not to betray my dreadful secret! If any one knew it, I should die outright."

And here she fell to weeping.

"My poor little girl, don't cry!" said Alwyne, greatly touched. "Of course I won't. What do you take me for?"

He clasped both her hands in his, and looked tenderly in her face, feeling repentant for his cruelty of the afternoon.

"I was a brute to-day," he went on, penitently, "but I



did not mean it. I swear no one shall ever hear the least word from me. You know," his tone growing very soft, "I was awfully fond of you, and, though of course that is all over now, I could not help feeling savage when I saw that ass Lister making love to you."

Considering that it was all over, his gaze was rather ardent, his manner extremely tender, and the pressure of his hands not altogether indicative of a burnt-out flame. But propinquity is admittedly dangerous.

"Oh," cried poor Dulcie, feeling this moment as though he were the only friend she had in the world, "do not be unkind to me any more! If you knew how wretched I am, you would be sorry for me."

"My poor dear little girl!" uttered Alwyne, genuinely touched. And, without any evil intent, he yielded to the strong temptation that seized him, and, putting his arm round her, drew her head tenderly on his breast. And at this precise moment, George Lister, with furious eyes, stood before them, crying, in a voice hoarse with rage,—

"By God! this is too bad!"

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## CHAPTER XXV.

ALWYNE and Dulcie sprang to their feet,—the man full of wrath, the girl of terror.

"D—n you! what do you mean by coming spying here?" cried Alwyne, and he aimed a blow at Lister which sent him reeling. Recovering himself, George sprang upon his foe like a bull-dog, and in a moment the two were engaged in mortal combat.

Dulcie shrieked aloud, and her shrieks brought speedy aid in the person of Jack, who had missed the two men, and was searching for them to join in a dance which had been proposed in the drawing-room.

Horried at the sight which greeted him, he flung himself upon the combatants.

"Are you mad?" he cried. "Do you want to raise the whole house?"

Quivering with rage, perhaps not wholly unmixed with

shame, the two men stood panting and glaring at each other.

"Pray, Miss Vernon, go in at once!" said Jack; and, terrified as she was, Dulcie could not fail to remark the stern displeasure of his tone. She crept away, feeling the most guilty and miserable wretch in the world. What awful Nemesis perpetually dogged her footsteps and led her into the most appalling situations! An agonized fear smote her that Lister would tell what he had seen, that this terrible affray would soon be public property, and that she was for evermore disgraced and ruined. Wild visions of flight sped across her brain: she would never be able to face her mother if this fearful story were made known to her. Cowering and terrified, trembling in every limb, she took her way to her room.

Meantime, Jack, full of righteous wrath, was giving the combatants a piece of his mind, and they received it very much as hounds with guilty consciences take a rating.

"Upon my soul," he cried, "this is a nice gentlemanlike thing, to maul each other like two costermongers before a lady! And you, Alwyne, with a wife! A pretty figure you will cut in this disgraceful business! For God's sake get away quietly to your own room, and stop there till I come to you! George, I must get you in the back way somehow."

For poor Lister's nose was ignobly dripping blood beyond the powers of a handkerchief to control, and his shirt-front bore fearful testimony to the fray.

Jack succeeded in getting his guest by the back staircase to his own room, and, when his friend's nose was sufficiently stanchd to make conversation possible, he sternly requested an explanation.

"The scoundrel!" cried George, with many adjectives and expletives. "Only married a month, too! And God knows," with a gulp in his throat, "how I loved that girl! My greatest hope in the world was to marry her. I missed her out of the drawing-room, and then I saw him sneak off, and I was determined he should not be alone with her: so in a minute or two I went after them, and there I found the blackguard with the girl in his arms."

"Well?" said Jack, who was horrified in his mind, thinking of poor Lady Lucy as well as of Dulcie, and

cursing Alwyne in his heart for an unprincipled scoundrel.

"Well, my feelings got the better of me, and I confronted them and cried out that it was too bad, and he started up and struck out at me. But, by —, he has not heard the last of it! I'll fight him. By — I will!"

"I don't think you will," returned Jack, coolly. "If you are a gentleman, as until to-night I took you to be, you won't bring disgrace and misery upon two poor innocent women,—at all events," correcting himself, "upon one."

"It wasn't her fault, I swear!" cried George, flaring up in her defence: "it was his. He always was an infernal blackguard about women: you know he was, though he is your cousin."

Jack had not the smallest inclination to defend Alwyne, with whom he was furious.

"Look here, George," he said, quietly. "Miss Vernon is under my roof, and, as my guest, any one who causes trouble or annoyance to her has to answer to me. You have got to swear on your honor as a gentleman, before you leave this room, that you will never breathe a word to living soul about having seen her in Alwyne's arms. If you have any further quarrel with him, the whole thing is bound to come out; and that I swear it shall not."

Lister was a young fellow of honorable instincts.

"Do you suppose," he said, reproachfully, "that I would hurt a hair of the girl's head?"

And then, poor boy, overcome by his feelings, he buried his face in his hands and gave a convulsive sob.

"I did love her so!" he went on, presently; and Jack, greatly touched, his honest heart full of sympathy, laid a kind hand on Lister's shoulder, saying,—

"It is awful hard lines, poor old chap. Don't think too badly of the girl," he went on, after a pause. "You know there is no doubt she was very fond of Alwyne last winter, and so was he of her, and then, for some reason or other, no one knows why, her mother interfered and sent him about his business. And I dare say it was only some little explanation they were having, and perhaps neither meant any harm: only you know it is awfully dangerous for



people to be out in the moonlight together, and I wish to heaven," wound up Jack, vigorously, "that you had had the sense to keep out of the way."

"I wish I had, now," groaned George.

"Well, I must go back to the drawing-room and make the best story I can," said Jack. "I suppose I had better order your trap and say you've gone home with a headache."

"Yes," responded Lister. "I'll get in at the stables. Send my coat up to me here to cover myself up with."

"All right. I'll ride over and see you to-morrow. And you swear to keep this dark?"

"I swear, but only for her sake. By George, I should like——"

But Jack cut him short by leaving the room.

The ladies were waiting in wondering expectation for the arrival of their swains. Jack put on the most cheerful air he could muster.

"I am afraid we shan't manage a dance to-night," he said. "Lister has gone home seedy, and I can't persuade Alwyne to leave his cigar," he added, mendaciously, hating himself for having to tell even so trifling a lie.

"I will go and fetch him," cried Lady Lucy. "How lazy of him! Where is he?"

"I saw him last in the garden," answered Jack, fearful lest she should seek him in his room.

Lady Lucy ran off to the garden, accompanied by the only remaining man, and Jack went to his cousin's room to see what traces he bore of the fray.

One glance at him showed that he would develop a fine black eye by the morrow, and so disconcerted was Jack by this discovery that he forgot to reproach him.

"What the deuce are you going to say to your wife?" he cried, anxiously. "You must invent something. Say you tumbled over the roots of a tree. You must never let out one word of this to a soul. Lister is gone; he will hold his tongue; now you had better think how to make your story good. I can't stop, or people will begin to fancy there's something up."

As he left the room, it occurred to Jack that there was yet another person to be thought of. Dulcie was probably still in fear and trembling and uncertain what course

events had taken. He paused to think. He did not like the idea of going to her room, but still less did he like that of writing to her and sending the note by a servant.

He went on tiptoe to the corridor where her room was, and tapped softly at the door. She opened it with a scared look, and his heart was touched by compassion in a moment.

"Come down-stairs," he whispered, gently. "Not a soul will ever know a word of what has happened; and I hope you feel that you can trust me."

Without another word, he sped noiselessly away and returned to the drawing-room.

But Dulcie's nerves were too sorely shaken to admit of her reappearing in public that night. Relieved of her worst terrors, she hastened to disrobe, and when Grace came to look for her she pleaded fatigue and indisposition and announced her intention of going to bed at once.

Mrs. Vernon had been extremely uncomfortable meantime. The simultaneous disappearance of Alwyne and her daughter had filled her with apprehension, and when Grace brought word that Dulcie had gone to bed with a headache she was by no means reassured, remembering what had come of her pretended headache on a previous occasion.

She, however, refrained from going to see Dulcie: it was impossible, she felt, despairingly, to contend with or overcome her folly: so she left her to her fate. On inquiring of Morton later on, she elicited that Dulcie really seemed extremely unwell; but she contented herself with recommending the maid to see that she had all she wanted.

Lady Lucy raced all over the grounds in pursuit of the recalcitrant Alwyne, but in vain. Then she sought him in the smoking-room, with no better success. Finally she proceeded to his dressing-room; and here she found him. He was so horribly frightened and felt so guilty that it had the effect of making him extremely amiable.

"Why, Alwyne," cried her ladyship, "what on earth have you done to your eye?"

He affected to treat the matter in a light and airy manner.

"The fact is, my dear girl," he answered, pleasantly,

"that I went out to have a smoke, and came a most infernal cropper over the roots of one of those confounded old trees and hit my eye against a garden-seat. It's rather a mercy I didn't put it out."

"Poor dear boy!" said Lady Lucy, kindly. "But, you know, it rather serves you right for not coming in to dance when we wanted you."

"Well, I can't come now, anyhow," he returned, still quite pleasantly. "I'm afraid I shall have a horrid black eye to-morrow. Such a nice respectable sort of thing, too!" he added, forcing a laugh.

"It is rather awkward," she assented. "But every one will know you can't have got it fighting."

And she laughed cheerfully, without the smallest *arrière-pensée*.

"You had better go down again, Lu," remarked Alwyne, "and don't make any fuss about it. It will only worry my aunt."

Lady Lucy returned to the drawing-room, and naïvely related the story of Alwyne's accident with her own little theory of retributive justice, but also with many expressions of wifely compassion.

The party soon after broke up, to Sir John's unspeakable relief. For once he could even say good-by to Mrs. Chandos without wishing to detain her. When the last guest was gone, he went back to Alwyne. He had never set up for being a censor of morals; he was never down upon any one; but he had a deep and indignant sense that his cousin had behaved like a villain to a woman under his roof, and he intended to have an assurance that there should be no recurrence of the love-passages of this evening. Jack was very diffident, as a rule, about interfering or giving advice: he had, however, a very strong sense of honor, and this gave him the necessary resolution to say out straightly what was in his mind.

As he entered the room, Alwyne saw by the look in his eyes and the unusual sternness of his manner that there was to be a reckoning between them. But for the fact of his having a wife and the horrible fear of her getting to know what had happened, he would probably have brazened the matter out; but now he hastened to say, in his most propitiatory manner,—



"This is a duced unlucky business, Jack, and I am awfully sorry for my share in it."

"It is something more than unlucky," said Jack, warmly. "It is utterly disgraceful; and I don't see what excuse you can make for it in any way."

"Look here, Jack," cried Alwyne, "I give you my word of honor that I meant no harm, and that there would have been none if that blundering ass Lister had not come playing the spy."

"You mean you would not have been found out," retorted Jack, indignantly.

"Listen, my dear old chap!" cried Alwyne. "I will tell you exactly what happened. You know how awfully fond I was of that poor little girl last winter, and that I wanted to marry her. Well, I couldn't: I cannot explain why to you, but there was a very good reason. I admit that I proposed to Lucy out of pique, but I am extremely fond of her; she's a real good sort, and I would not do anything wrong by her, for the world. Wait a bit!" as Jack looked incredulous.

"I must own I was rather unkind to poor Dulcie Vernon to-day, and said some nasty things to her at the picnic, and she took it dreadfully to heart, and when we met on the stairs going down to dinner she said she had something she wanted to say to me, and I proposed meeting her under the limes when we came out from dinner. Well, when we were there, the poor little thing began to cry, and I felt awfully sorry for her,—you know, Jack, it does upset one to see a woman cry,—and I swear to you upon my soul that without the very least thought of harm to her or Lucy, just out of sheer good feeling, I put my arm round the poor little girl to comfort her, and then I looked up and saw that fool Lister standing gibbering in front of us like an ape. So I lost my temper and let out at him."

"Ah!" said Jack. "I thought it was understood that gentlemen did not brawl and strike each other before a woman."

"Oh, I grant I was wrong," admitted Alwyne; "but I was so infernally provoked."

"And suppose," suggested Jack, "that I had not by good fortune come along, or that any of the servants, hearing Miss Vernon scream, had rushed out: a pretty

business it would have been for you and your wife and her!"

"Oh, well," returned Alwyne, "thank God it turned out as it did. You don't think," eagerly, "that any one suspects anything."

"I don't know that any one does," returned Jack: "but things have a nasty way of leaking out. However, I shall do my best, you may depend, to keep it quiet. And now, if you will take my advice, you will order your phaeton to-morrow morning directly after breakfast, and not wait till the afternoon. The sooner you put a good distance between yourself and Miss Vernon, the better for all parties concerned."

"Yes, that will be the best thing, no doubt," assented Alwyne, with a good grace. "But, my good fellow, don't run away with any mistaken notion that I am still in love with Dulcie Vernon, or that I am not devoted to Lucy."

Jack made no answer to this, but, bidding his cousin good-night, left him with anything but a light heart, and secretly cursing his selfishness. It was all very well for him; but what about the poor girl?

It was no feigned indisposition on Dulcie's part that prevented her going down to breakfast the next morning. Fear and agitation had kept sleep from her eyes: in spite of Jack's reassuring words, she felt no confidence that this dreadful affair would remain a secret, and her cheeks were hot with shame at the recollection of the compromising situation in which George Lister had seen her. How could she hope or expect that an angry man, burning with jealousy, would keep her secret or put any but the worst construction on her conduct? Poor Dulcie told herself over and over again that she had meant no harm; she hardly knew how it came to pass that Alwyne's arm had stolen round her; she only knew that she had been unutterably miserable, and that Alwyne's kindness and his caress had soothed her.

This morning her head ached and throbbed: she could not raise it from the pillow.

Alwyne, on the contrary, appeared at breakfast in the most cheerful and amiable of moods,—laughed at his own misfortune, and was thoroughly pleasant all round. His wife's maid had confectioned him a black silk patch which

concealed the discolored orb, and he declared that, as he could not see to drive with one eye, he must trust his life and limbs to Lucy's coachmanship.

Lilah's sharp eyes scarcely quitted him, and she confided to Grace afterwards that Alwyne seldom made himself so agreeable unless he had a guilty conscience; and, indeed, she formed a tolerably shrewd guess that some fracas had occurred in which he, Lister, and Dulcie had been engaged.

When the bride and bridegroom had departed, amidst much bustle and commotion, and with many friendly expressions on all sides, Jack ordered his horse and betook himself to visit the other combatant. He found him with his good looks somewhat impaired by a swelled nose and a bump on his forehead. Moreover, he was in a state of the deepest dejection.

"I was so awfully fond of that girl!" he groaned, almost in tears. "I had made up my mind to marry her if she would have me; and now, of course, all that is over."

Jack chivalrously did his best to explain away Dulcie's momentary weakness, and then went so far as to say,—

"I am afraid Miss Vernon does not mean to marry. If she had, she would, I think, have taken Alwyne, whom she really seemed to like, last winter."

"I don't suppose I ever had a chance," returned Lister, despondently; "but, even if I had, I should have given up the idea after this."

"My dear chap," said Jack, diffidently, only anxious to make the best of the matter for Dulcie, "I suppose one can hardly expect to marry a woman who has never liked any one else."

"No, I dare say not," answered George, moodily. "But I draw the line at a married man. If a girl will go on with him, she isn't to be trusted: you mark my words. I shall go up to London to-morrow when I look a little more respectable," walking up to the glass and inspecting himself, "and I shan't come back until she has left you. Send me a line, Jack, will you?"

"All right," he replied, cheerfully; then, after a moment's pause, "I say, George, I dare say Miss Vernon feels rather bad about what happened. I should like to be able to give



her your word of honor that—that it is quite safe with you.”

“Do, by all means,” answered George: “there’s my hand on it. And—and, Jack,” faltering, “you might tell her how awfully fond I was of her.”

“No, no,” cried Jack; “let us hope you will be able to tell her that yourself one of these days. Good-by, George.”

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

“**THAT** was rather a mysterious affair last night, was it not?” Mrs. Herbert remarked to Reine, as they sat in two lounging-chairs under the shade of a big tree in the garden. “Mr. Lister suddenly taken ill, Mr. Temple tumbling over a tree, and your cousin disappearing altogether.”

“Yes, it was,” returned Reine, a thoughtful frown drawing her brows together. She felt slightly embarrassed by her knowledge of Dulcie’s affairs, for she had not a secret in the world of her own from Mrs. Herbert, and would gladly have discussed this with her, but for a sense of honor, which restrained her from confiding her cousin’s dilemma even to so discreet a lady as Mrs. Herbert.

On her part, Mrs. Herbert never imagined for a moment that there was any secret in the case, or that she was causing the smallest embarrassment to Reine by mentioning the matter. They were accustomed to speak of everything to each other without reserve.

“Mr. Lister seemed extremely put out in the afternoon,” resumed Mrs. Herbert, “when Mr. Temple so coolly carried the young lady off. It is fortunate that Lady Lucy is not of a jealous disposition, or she might not have been very well pleased at her husband’s behavior. Dulcie is a pretty, sweet-mannered girl. I am not surprised at men losing their hearts to her; but I do wonder a little at her obduracy. I suppose Mr. Temple was very devoted to her last winter, and she seemed to like him. Why did she not marry him?”

“My dear Mia,” returned Reine, disingenuously, “who

can answer for the caprices of a woman, still less a girl? And, besides, she might have liked him very much without feeling any inclination to marry him."

"Perhaps it runs in the family to object to marriage," remarked Mrs. Herbert, apparently occupied in contemplating the stones in one of her rings.

"The experience of some of its members would not be calculated to tempt others to try it," rejoined Reine.

Mrs. Herbert promptly changed the subject, assuming from the tone of her friend's voice that the subject was not agreeable to her.

"I think," she said, "that Sir John behaved with great tact and discretion last night."

Reine smiled maliciously.

"Anything serves to give you an opportunity for glorifying the beloved object, Mia," she observed. "How weak you are about that young man!"

"I am very fond of him, certainly," assented Mrs. Herbert.

"I shall not be surprised at any time," resumed Reine, "to hear that you are about to become Lady Chester."

"Poor dear boy! What a fate for him!" smiled Mrs. Herbert. "No! but if he were an impecunious orphan I should be strongly tempted to adopt him."

"Talk of an angel and you hear his wings," laughed Reine. "Here comes your paragon!"

Jack was advancing swiftly towards them, his face lighting up with pleasure as he approached.

"You must stop and lunch with us," said Mrs. Herbert, and he accepted gladly. "And now," she continued, doing something quite opposed to her usual practice, "I am going to ask you two to entertain each other for a quarter of an hour. I have two letters that I positively must write, and if I do not write them before lunch there is very small chance of their being ready by post-time."

Reine had quite a friendly feeling for Jack now, and had forgotten that he had once been accused of being in love with her. So she was quite unembarrassed at being left alone with him, and not disposed to suspect any treachery on the part of her friend.

"How is your cousin this morning?" she asked. "Has he recovered from his accident?"

"He has rather a black eye," returned Jack, "but it is covered up with a patch; so there is not much to be seen. They started directly after breakfast, and are half-way home by now."

"And the rest of your party?" inquired Reine; "are they all well?"

"Quite, thanks," he answered, "except Miss Vernon, who is still suffering from headache and was not able to come down to breakfast."

Reine looked at him rather fixedly, and said, suddenly.—

"Was Dulcie in the garden last night when Mr. Temple met with his accident?"

"Was she not in her room?" asked Jack, seeing something of an engrossingly interesting nature which caused him for a moment to turn his face away from Mrs. Chandos.

Many women under the circumstances, seeing what a poor figure Jack cut at dissembling, would have plied him with questions and have tried to wring the truth from him; but Reine could appreciate loyalty and respect a man for not betraying a confidence; so she simply answered, "Ah, yes, I suppose she was," and proceeded to compliment him upon the success of yesterday's picnic.

"Have you been writing any poetry lately?" Jack ventured to ask, presently.

"You will be glad to hear that I have not," smiled Reine, with a trifle of malice in her tone. "I know that you do not approve of my verses."

Jack flushed crimson.

"Why do you say that?" he cried, in great distress. "I think them most beautiful. Only," hesitating, "only I wished so much that you would write something—something happier, as if you took a cheerful view of life."

"Something comic?" suggested Reine, taking pleasure in teasing him. "Do you think I could write the words for a good music-hall song, or something of that sort?" Then, seeing how dreadfully pained he looked, she added, "No! my muse is a sorrowful one, and must always be so. It is a good sign that I have not been writing lately, for it proves that I have not been unhappy."

"I am so glad to hear you say that!" he returned, with more ardor than the occasion seemed to require. "You



ought always to be happy. You were never meant for anything else."

"When I was a child," said Reine, not appearing to observe the intensity of his expression, "I had my horoscope cast by an old man who lived in the village close by my grandmother's place. It was written on a dirty piece of paper, and contained abstruse and rather ill-spelt references to various planets. The only part of it which I remember is the prediction that I was to be 'immersed in sorrow and trouble while young, but happy in old age.' So I am rather looking forward to that halcyon time, in the hope that, as the first part of the prophecy has been correct, the last may also be realized."

"But you will have a long time to wait for that," remarked Jack.

"Not so very long," she answered, indifferently. "Now," smiling, "be good enough not to rack your brain for a compliment: there is nothing I dislike so much. By the way," with a swift change of tone, "have you heard our news? Do you know that we are to have a guest at the dower-house?"

With a lover's proneness to jealousy, Jack felt a twinge at this announcement. He did his best to conceal it, and said,—

"Really," in an interested voice.

"Guess!" commanded Reine, smiling; and he guessed with perfect correctness.

"I think by your looking so pleased that it must be Bertram," he replied.

"How clever of you!" laughed Reine. "Yes, it is Henry Bertram. Mia and I have been quite excited ever since we had his acceptance this morning."

Jack did not look quite as though he shared their satisfaction. True, his fears had slumbered in London, but they were quite ready to spring up again. A man has such opportunities in the country and staying in the same house with a woman.

"It will be very delightful for him, no doubt," said Jack, in a somewhat embarrassed tone.

"And for us too," returned Reine. "He will bring us all the very latest news and gossip: it will be equivalent to a week's visit to London,—not in this dull time, but in

the height of the season. He always hears everything, and has a wonderful talent for retailing it."

"I should not have thought you were fond of scandal," remarked Jack, in a slightly aggrieved tone.

"I did not say scandal: I said gossip," returned Reine. "Please to note the distinction."

"A distinction without a difference," said Jack, whose feathers were ruffled at the thought of an interloper in his Eden.

"A distinction with a very great difference," insisted Reine. "Gossip is good-natured, scandal is ill-natured. No one ever heard Henry Bertram say anything ill-natured. You know, Sir John, that you never did."

"No, certainly," replied Jack, "I cannot say that I ever did."

"I thought you liked him," observed Reine, rather unkindly. "And yet you do not seem at all pleased to hear he is coming. We were going to ask you to come and help us entertain him; but I am afraid you will not care to come."

"I shall be delighted to come," cried poor Jack, with energy, seriously alarmed at the thought of being ousted from Paradise. "And I hope that he will come up to us, too. My mother will, I know, be charmed to see him. She talked so much about him after meeting him at Mrs. Herbert's."

"She has no idea what a terrible wolf in sheep's clothing he is," laughed Reine. "However, he has never devoured a lamb yet."

"Except you," thought Jack, sorrowfully, looking hard at her; and Reine, being a thought-reader, divined his glance at once.

"No one," she said, with warmth, "ever heard him say a word to shock a person's prejudices. He never speaks of his belief or his unbelief before any one whose opinions do not coincide with his own."

"Still, he does not believe in anything," replied Jack, with an obstinate design of falling foul of Bertram, since Reine had appeared so delighted at the prospect of his coming.

"At all events," retorted Mrs. Chandos, "if his views do not coincide with those of many 'professing Christians,'

as they are called, his actions are, as a rule, worth fifty of theirs."

It was rather fortunate that at this moment the luncheon-bell rang, and the pair, somewhat ruffled, took their way to the house.

Mrs. Herbert saw in an instant that her favorites were not quite in harmony, and exerted herself to restore cordial relations.

"I hope," she thought, "that foolish boy has not been trying to improve the occasion by declaring his passion." But she was soon enlightened as to the cause of his despondent mien.

"I have been telling Sir John our delightful news," said Reine, being considerate enough, however, to choose a moment when the servants had left the room, "and he does not in the very least share our enthusiasm."

Mrs. Herbert immediately ranged herself on Jack's side, thinking it very unkind of Reine to torment him.

"Perhaps he does not express it in so exaggerated a manner as you do, my love," she remarked. "But I am quite sure Sir John will be pleased to see Henry, for they are the best of friends, and I am looking forward to his helping us to entertain our guest. A man cannot be always with women: he wants a friend of his own sex to smoke with and talk to about sport and other congenial topics. I know Sir John will be delighted to give him a mount and show him the country."

Jack's face brightened in a moment. As long as he was not to be left out in the cold, the best horse in his stables was at Bertram's service, and he was ready to show him any amount of hospitality.

"And four is such a pleasant number," proceeded Mrs. Herbert. "I have a great deal to say to Henry, and it will be your task," with a mischievous glance at Reine, "to rescue Mrs. Chandos from the disagreeable part of third."

"Indeed, my dear Mia," returned Reine, with spirit, "if you think you are going to have the monopoly of Mr. Bertram you are very much mistaken. And," maliciously, "I really cannot undertake to console Sir John for your neglect, or to be made a *pis aller* for him."

"How unkind you are!" said poor Jack's eyes, quite plainly; but Mrs. Herbert laughed.



"You are too modest, my dear; but still you must not expect always to carry everything before you, and when you have the misfortune to be in company with a woman so much younger and more attractive in every way than yourself, you must be prepared for an occasional reverse."

"I will endeavor to adapt myself to circumstances," returned Reine, trying by an assumption of extreme gravity to spoil her friend's little joke. Harmony was, however, completely restored by this time, and the three repaired to the garden to drink coffee, and Jack remained in great contentment until Mrs. Herbert's horses came prancing round to the door, when, with a thousand apologies and much expressed astonishment at the rapid flight of time, he took his leave.

As he rode up the drive on reaching the Hall, he caught sight of Dulcie sitting alone in the garden. He left his horse at the stables and went to join her. She greeted him with a smile that was a very poor make-believe of mirth, and he felt quite concerned to see how wan and white she looked.

"I am afraid you are not at all well," he said, in a very kind voice, sitting down beside her. He could never bear to see a woman suffer, and he saw at a glance that Dulcie was suffering both in mind and body.

She put her hand to her forehead with a weary gesture.

"My head aches," she said. "That is why I stayed at home. The others have all gone out."

"I am so sorry!" returned Jack. "Can I not do anything for you?"

She hesitated a moment; then, gaining confidence from the extreme kindness of his tone, she said,—

"Have you seen Mr. Lister?"

"Yes," he replied, anxious to say anything that might relieve her mind. "I was over there this morning. He is going up to London to-morrow or next day, and—and—he gave me his word of honor as a gentleman that nothing should come out about last night."

"Oh!" gasped Dulcie, with intense relief. "And do you think he is to be trusted?"

"I am sure of it," returned Jack, cordially.

Dulcie looked up at him, and then away again.

"I do not know what you can think of me," she said, blushing painfully, "but indeed——"

"I do not think anything," Jack interrupted, hastily. "I have no wish to pry into other people's affairs. No doubt it was all a misunderstanding; but please do not explain it to me. I am quite sure it is better not to discuss it. Don't you think," abruptly changing the subject, "that it would do you good to have a little fresh air? Come for a drive with me. I'll have my phaeton round in half an hour, if you will."

Yes, Dulcie said, she would be very glad to go with him. Her own company had become intolerable to her, and she was only too thankful to be taken out of herself. So Jack went back to the stables, and she strolled into the house to get her hat.

During the drive Jack laid himself out to the utmost to amuse her, and, seeing through his kind intention and feeling extremely grateful to him, Dulcie smiled and talked, and affected a gayety she was far from feeling. Still, the effort did her good, and she returned to the hall in a very much more cheerful frame of mind than that in which she had left it. All the evening she kept up a semblance of good spirits, and Sir John was so constantly at her side that his mother was delighted, and had serious hopes that he was getting weaned from his allegiance to the dangerous Mrs. Chandos.

His kindness was not lost upon Dulcie, who put no misconstruction upon it. She could not help contrasting him with Alwyne, and thinking how unkind and inconsiderate the latter had been towards her. And then her thoughts went back to Noel, and, for the first time for many months, she wished that the accident had not happened,—that she had gone away with him whilst she loved him, and that she had never met Alwyne. No doubt she would have been perfectly happy now as Noel's wife, and in India she would have been adored and made much of. And now what had she to look forward to? She hated being with her mother, who looked upon her as a burden, and she wished that she had consented to marry Noel, as her mother had desired, and gone away out of the country with him. She could not have been more miserable than she was now; nay, she could not have been half so miser-

able. She was fond of him once: why should she not come to care for him again, now that there was no longer any hope of Alwyne? And, remembering Alwyne's ostentatious attentions to his wife, and the pains he had been at during that walk in the wood to mortify and vex her, the thought occurred to her that, after all, he was hardly worth wearing the willow for.

But she went to sleep that night without seeing a way out of her misery, and thankful only for one thing,—that her secret was not betrayed, and that the disgrace she had feared had not overtaken her.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

HENRY BERTRAM had arrived, had been welcomed with cordial delight by the ladies at the dower-house, and now, having done justice to an excellent dinner, was sitting with them on the veranda outside the drawing-room windows.

"Here indeed is the happy valley!" he exclaimed, with a sigh of *bien-être*; "here, far from the world, from its cares, ambitions,—worst of all, its pleasures,—might a man's heart know rest! I feel at this moment as though I never want to see a town again, but could spend the remainder of my life in serene contemplation, always provided," smiling, "that I might have the same delightful objects to contemplate."

"Think so as long as you can, my dear Henry," returned Mrs. Herbert. "We are flattered to have inspired these sentiments in you, if but for half an hour; and, as you will only give us the pleasure of your company for so short a time, we shall take the greatest pains to keep up the illusion: shall we not, Reine?"

"I trust," said Bertram, fervently, "that you have not been making plans to amuse me; because I consider the very most delightful thing in life is to do nothing in pleasant company."

"Oh," said Reine, teasingly, "Mia has filled up every hour for you. She will not allow me any of your society,



for fear I should bore you, and with break of day Sir John Chester is to arrive with fleet steeds, and you are to scour the country with him and be shown every show-place, ruin, view, and object of interest in the county."

Bertram made a gesture of mock dismay.

"How much of this is fact, and how much the imagination of the poetess?" he asked of Mrs. Herbert.

"It is like the inspiration of most poets," laughed his hostess,—*"truth seen either through a magnifying-glass, or like a face reflected in a spoon,—anything but actual fact, and yet inspired by fact. Sir John has offered to place his stables at your disposal, and it is for you to accept or decline as your fancy dictates."*

"I like that lad, and shall be glad to meet him again," remarked Bertram, not unmindful of what Mrs. Herbert had confided to him of her match-making plans.

"Oh, pray," cried Reine, "do not set Mia off on the subject of her paragon. I hear of nothing but his perfections all day long when you are not here: for pity's sake let us have a new theme now!"

"Do not believe her!" interrupted Mrs. Herbert. "But if I do speak well of him," turning to Mrs. Chandos, "pray what do I say that is more than true?"

"I humble myself in the dust, Mia," returned her friend. "I admit that he is the handsomest, the wittiest, the most heroic, the most pattern young man altogether in the three countries,—nay, in Europe, in the whole world. Will that content you?"

"Not at all. Exaggerated praise is contempt in disguise. I never said more than that Sir John was very amiable and kind-hearted, and the best son in the world."

"You will see, Henry," said Reine, maliciously, "that we shall dance at the wedding yet. Indeed, I suppose it will be your pleasing task to give the bride away."

"I hope we shall all be at his wedding," remarked Mrs. Herbert, "and that his wife will be worthy of him."

"How unkind of you! Poor young man! As if he is not much happier now than he could possibly be with a wife to torment him!"

"Why should she torment him, pray?" asked Mrs. Herbert. "If she were a nice woman, she would be devoted to him."

"She would probably not be a nice woman," retorted Reine. "Nice people never marry each other: one is always infinitely better than the other. I tremble to think of the sort of woman Henry would marry if he took unto himself a wife."

"Have no fear, my dear," returned Bertram, gayly. "Henry's wife is not yet born. Marriage under some circumstances is a very desirable estate, but, though I recommend it to my friends, I have never yet desired it for myself. Perfect liberty, absolute freedom, is my idea of well-being; and even the most elastic fetters would seem bonds to me."

"It is very cruel of you to say that to Mia and me," smiled Reine. "Devoted as we are to each other, I am sure we are quite capable of quarrelling *à outrance* if you showed any disposition to throw the handkerchief to either of us."

"Quite!" echoed Mrs. Herbert. "Now, after this confession, tell us about Cowes."

"What shall I tell you? One Cowes fortnight is precisely like another, except for any difference the weather may make. Nine people out of ten are profoundly bored or extremely uncomfortable, cooped up in yacht-cabins or fifth-rate lodgings. Men dawdling about and yawning, women who hate and fear the sea running horrible risks of *mal de mer* for the sake of being *en évidence*,—all their eager eyes converging to the lode-star of royalty, all dying to be distinguished by a word of notice, or, mingled bliss and anguish, an invitation on board the royal yacht. But only fancy the horror of succumbing to nausea under august eyes. There were the usual number of pretty women and wonderful toilets in the club gardens and at the dances; the usual practical jokes at the expense of a certain lady; the usual flirtations; the usual scandals; the usual everything."

"And what was the latest scandal?" inquired Mrs. Herbert.

"The most engrossing topic of conversation was Lady Blanche's engagement to young L. It is a regular case of Titania and Bottom. He appears to be an irreclaimable lout, without birth, breeding, or money, a confirmed drunkard, I fear, and she is the sweetest little creature

possible and absolutely infatuated about him. He treats her in the most cavalier manner, and she hangs upon his every word and look with an adoring expression that is positively painful to see. I am afraid that her mother, who is sadly weak, will not be able to prevent her from marrying him."

"It is shocking!" observed Mrs. Herbert. "I really feel thankful that I have no children. They are almost certain to choose the very people to fall in love with that one most objects to, and the instant you thwart them they forget all your devotion, and regard you simply as an enemy to be detested and circumvented, possibly to be treated with coldness and disdain."

"That is very true," assented Reine, with a sigh, thinking of Dulcie and Mrs. Vernon.

"I do not know," remarked Bertram, cheerfully, "that we have any right to expect our children to see with our eyes and judge with our minds. You and I," turning to Mrs. Herbert ("we cannot include Reine as a contemporary) know how very differently we think and feel on many subjects from what we did twenty years ago. To be tenacious of one's loves and one's opinions is very natural to the best sort of youth; and I suppose none of us would very much value affection that could be diverted from us at the will of a third person."

"I suppose not," assented Mrs. Herbert. "But it is very melancholy to see young people digging pit-falls for themselves, which, if they tumble into, they will hardly ever get out of during the rest of their lives. However," lightly, "as we are none of us blessed with olive-branches, we need not make ourselves vicariously melancholy with such reflections."

Mr. Bertram turned to Reine.

"Has this charming place not inspired your muse?" he asked her. "Are we not to have 'Verses from the Dower-House'?"

"No; I do not intend to write verses from anywhere," she replied, a trifle pettishly.

"What! never any more?"

"No; I am disgusted at being misunderstood, and tired of being called improper and blasphemous and atheistic."



"All great people have been misunderstood, my queen," said Bertram.

"Do not think I am posing for a *femme incomprise*. It is a part I particularly dislike. And indeed," with a proud gesture of her head, "I do not wish to be understood by the general world. What it thinks is a matter of supreme indifference to me."

"I will tell you," interrupted Mrs. Herbert, "why her pen has been idle. She has been much happier of late; and I never knew Reine inspired unless she was unhappy."

"'Prosperous nations have no history.' Reine, happy, writes no poetry. Then I will not wish for more," answered Bertram, with an affectionate glance at Mrs. Chandos. "I would rather she were happy than the most famous woman of her time."

"Happy!" echoed Reine. "Happy is a very big word. I exist, and I am not absolutely miserable. The sun shines. I breathe pure air. I have Mia's society, which," with a smile, "is amusing when I can get her to vary the theme of her remarks, and now I have you: so that—yes, really to-night I am next door to being happy: I am content."

"Would anything make you happy?" Bertram asked. "Can you conceive a state of bliss?"

"That is the worst of it," she replied: "I can. I imagine bliss so perfect that all reality must inevitably fall far short of it."

"That is the penalty of imagination," he returned. "I, who am a poor, prosaic earth-worm, am always happy, and the little cares and worries of life only make a foil to its bright side for me."

"You will have gout some day," smiled Reine, "and then melancholy will mark you for her own."

"It is humiliating to think how men's minds are governed by their stomachs," he answered, laughing,— "that it is not to one's heart or brain one owes ideas and impulses, but to the greater or less perfection of one's powers of assimilating and digesting food."

A note was here brought to Mrs. Herbert, with an intimation that a reply was awaited.

She read it smiling.

"Do not look at her whilst she reads," whispered Reine; "it is from the beloved one."

"Here is a charming proposal for to-morrow," said Mrs. Herbert, refolding her missive and returning it to its envelope. "Sir John wishes us to drive over to B——, which we have not yet seen. There is a delightful little inn where he proposes to order lunch, and he will drive one of us in his phaeton and the other two are to go in my victoria."

"An excellent idea," replied Reine, promptly. "Henry and I will go in the victoria, and that will give me the opportunity of the *tête-à-tête* for which I am so anxious. You, of course, Mia, will go with Sir John."

Mrs. Herbert smiled in reply.

"Do you approve the project?" she inquired of Bertram.

"With all my heart," he responded, cordially.

So the invitation was accepted, and Sir John bidden to come to the dower-house with his phaeton at noon on the following day.

Mrs. Chandos rallied her friend upon the imprudence of showing herself in public with Sir John. However, by some strange means for which the author cannot account, the next day it was Reine who occupied the seat by Sir John, whilst Mrs. Herbert and Bertram bowled away in the victoria.

It was a heavenly day, with a balmy west wind tempering the sun's ardor. Jack looked radiantly happy, and Reine, who was extremely fond of horses, felt a certain amount of pleasure in sitting behind the handsome, spirited chestnuts she had so often admired. But scarcely had they set out upon their journey when an incident occurred which went very near to spoiling their day's pleasure. About a mile from the dower-house they passed a group of cottages. Some twenty yards farther on a couple of children were playing on the bank by the road-side. Just as the phaeton came up to them, the imps, as is the delight of mischievous children, ran across the road under the horses' noses. Jack pulled them up on their haunches; Reine uttered a low cry; there was a yell, and one of the children lay in the road, with its head one inch from the front wheel. If the near horse had not

shied, the head would have been under it. There was an awful moment whilst the servant jumped out and Jack was pacifying the plunging horses, whose every movement endangered the child: then, as the man dragged it away and took it up in his arms, Jack cried, with a white face,—

“Good God! William, is he killed?”

A lusty yell gave an instant and satisfactory answer to his question.

“Bring him here and put him on my lap,” cried Reine, trembling; and the man reluctantly obeyed, having regard to the lady’s nice dress and the soiled and dusty condition of the urchin.

“He’s not hurt, Sir John, the young rascal!” said the indignant groom. “Serve him right if he was. He’s been up to it afore, and all but got Bob thrown the other day on Black Bess.”

Jack and Reine were carefully examining the screaming child, but only found a slight cut on his head, where a stone had struck him as he fell.

“There, my little lad, don’t cry,” said Jack, kindly. “Look at this!” And he produced a half-crown from his pocket, at which the tears promptly ceased to flow and the yells subsided.

“Go to their heads, William.” The horses were quiet now. “Do you mind holding the reins a moment?” to Mrs. Chandos; and Jack got out, lifted the child down, and, taking him by the hand, led him towards the cottage.

“He does not seem hurt,” remarked Reine to the groom.

“No, ma’am, not he,” returned William, unfeelingly. “I expect the horse’s shoulder just ketched him and spun him round. They’re always up to it, the young villains; and if he had been run over, it would just have bin a warnin’ to the others.”

Meantime, a woman came running out of the cottage, having been apprised by the other urchin, who had swiftly taken to his heels, of the catastrophe, and, seeing that her treasure was not injured, she proceeded to abuse and threaten him volubly, alternately offering deep apologies and courtesies to the young squire.



"There, Mrs. Wilson, don't scold him this time!" said Jack, good-naturedly. "He's been well frightened, and I don't suppose he will do it again."

"He want a good hidin', he do, Sir John; and that's what his father 'll gi 'un when he come home."

"No, no, not this time! You must promise me not to say anything more this time; but if it happens again, why, then he's to have a good thrashing. Do you hear that, my little man? Now, don't forget! Promise me you'll never do it again."

And the blubbering urchin was understood to give an undertaking to refrain from risking life and limb in future.

Strange what great effects small incidents cause in the human mind! Jack's good nature and tenderness to the child made Reine feel better disposed towards him than she had ever been up to this moment, and in her heart she compared him very favorably with two other men whom she had known intimately,—her husband and her father,—who, under similar circumstances, would have been very far from showing or feeling any pity or softness towards the mischievous cub.

She was more charming to him than she had ever been,—a fact of which Jack was delightedly conscious, although he did not guess the cause. Had he done so, he would have seriously contemplated endowing the good-for-nothing urchin with a ten-pound note in addition to the half-crown. How short the eight miles seemed! the milestones had surely been moved nearer together: how exhilarating was the west wind!—how glorious the sunshine!—how lovely the clouds floating like swans on the bosom of an azure lake! Surely there was never such a congenial *parti carré* as the one which lunched in the pretty, old-fashioned parlor of the Golden Bull, or loitered afterwards in the streets of the quaint old town.

Jack had something on his mind that he was anxious to say to Reine. It was not on his own account, but on that of Dulcie, for whom he felt unfeignedly sorry. He had delayed broaching the subject until the return journey, for, good fellow that he was, he was dreadfully diffident about interfering in matters which did not concern him, and horribly afraid of seeming to take a liberty.

About half-way home he suddenly lapsed into silence,

seemed rather *distract*, and was much occupied with removing flies real and imaginary from the sleek sides of his chestnuts. At last he broke out suddenly :

"I should so like to say something to you, Mrs. Chandos, only—only I should be so awfully distressed if you were to think I was taking a liberty."

Reine wondered a little what this preamble might mean, but he hastened on, lest she should be led into any mistaken idea of his intention :

"It is about your cousin, Miss Vernon. Of course I don't know—it may be only my imagination; but I can't help fancying that she is not very happy, poor little girl!"

And here he glanced diffidently round at Reine, to observe whether his remark was taken in good part. She looked thoughtful, for the knowledge of Dulcie's secret oppressed her.

"No," she said, hesitatingly, "I fear she is not quite happy. She is a good deal changed of late."

"I don't think," Jack hurried on, "that she and her mother quite hit it off, if you'll excuse my saying so. It seems to me as if she wanted a friend to give her a little advice,—one she wouldn't be afraid of, and that she could confide in."

And Jack's eyes plainly intimated that Reine was the person of whom he was thinking.

In his heart he believed that Dulcie was fretting after Alwyne. Reine was under the impression that her marriage and the dislike she had conceived for her husband caused her misery. Jack did not like to hint his suspicions, and Reine could not tell him what she knew.

"I am very fond of Dulcie," she said, presently. "I would gladly do anything I could to make her happier; but I am very much afraid my power falls far short of my will."

"Oh, no," cried Jack, eagerly. "If you would talk to her,—if you would persuade her that it's no use crying about spilt milk, that what's done can't be undone, and that there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

Jack's words were homely, but they afforded his listener a very clear exposition of his views. She saw that he attributed Dulcie's sadness to regret for his cousin.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

It was some little time before Reine answered Jack's eager speech. No doubt he knew something of which she was ignorant, something that had reference to the mysterious disappearance of the three young people at the hall that evening, but he would not betray Dulcie, and she had not the smallest desire to make him do so.

"It beats me," Jack pursued, seeing that she did not reply to him, "why, if she liked Alwyne and he was so in love with her, Mrs. Vernon did not let them marry each other."

"My aunt may have had good reasons for objecting," answered Reine, very much at a loss what to say.

"Oh, of course we know Alwyne has been rather spoiled," returned Jack, "and I can quite understand a mother being doubtful about his making a good husband: still, he really isn't a bad chap at heart, and with a nice amiable girl, who would give in to him, I think he would turn out all right. Still," with a troubled sigh, "it's no use going back to that now."

Reine knew that it was idle to discuss a subject on which they were at cross-purposes: so she said,—

"I will come up to-morrow and have a little talk with Dulcie, and try if I can be of any use to her."

"Do! do!" cried Jack. "That will be awfully good of you!"

He spoke as though it were his cousin, not Reine's, for whom he was pleading, and his tone expressed supreme confidence in the success of her mission.

As they passed the scene of the morning's adventure, Jack pulled up at the cottage to inquire whether any further injury to the boy had been discovered, and was greatly reassured when he came out, holding on to his mother's apron, abashed in spirits by the jobation he had received from his parent, but not a pin the worse otherwise.

Mrs. Chandos related the incident at dinner.

"I suppose," she said to Bertram, "that there will be no holding Mia after this, but I am bound to admit that her paragon showed to advantage to-day."



"Of course he did, dear boy," replied Mrs. Herbert, secretly delighted at Reine's praise: "he always does what is kind and nice."

"Have I not admitted it?" said Reine. "You must not expect me to prostrate myself and worship the young man because he was good-tempered under rather trying circumstances."

"The young monkey deserved a whipping!" remarked Bertram. "There is nothing so dangerous. The best horse I ever had was thrown down and broke his knees by being violently pulled up to save the neck of an imp of a child who rushed out in front of him. I remember that I swore pretty freely, and felt very little compassion for the child, on the occasion."

"All's well that ends well," said Reine. "We have really had a charming day, and for once an excursion has not bored me. And you, Henry?"

"I shall mark this day with a white stone," he answered, smiling.

The next morning Reine walked up to the hall. They were to dine there in the evening, but she knew that she would have no opportunity of speaking privately to Dulcie then. First she sought her aunt, told her of her intention, and asked permission to disclose to Dulcie that she was aware of her secret.

Mrs. Vernon was in a state of intense irritation.

"It is impossible," she exclaimed, "that I can go on being worried in this way. Dulcie is absolutely devoid of self-respect. She goes about looking wretched. I am certain every one in the house knows that she is pining after that odious young Temple. I have not the least doubt that some disgraceful scene occurred the other night when those three were absent from the drawing-room, which probably every one except myself is aware of. I will not ask any questions, for fear of being driven to exasperation. I assure you, Reine, that I would gladly give up half my income if I could send her out to join that wretched young man in India. If he had not been destitute of every spark of manly feeling, he would have insisted on taking her. As to going on in the way we are doing now, it is impossible. I should soon be in a mad-house. The constant strain of governing my feelings and

seeming to smile and observe nothing, is more than human flesh and blood can endure."

"Poor auntie," said Reine, soothingly, "it is indeed very trying for you. Let me speak to Dulcie and hear what she says. I cannot help pitying her too."

"Pitying her!" cried Mrs. Vernon, with exasperation. "What is there to pity? Her own folly and her unpardonable duplicity have brought all this upon her. Have I not watched over her from a child? Has any girl had more care or kindness bestowed upon her? and yet at the very first opportunity she forgets affection, duty, everything, and overwhelms me with disgrace and misery."

"It is a terrible grief for you," Reine replied, sympathetically. "We must try and see some way out of this dreadful dilemma. Let me go to her now and hear what she has to say."

So Mrs. Chandos proceeded to her cousin's chamber, and was fortunate enough to find her there.

"My dear child," she said, kissing her affectionately, "this is a terrible state of things. I want to talk to you about it: you know you may trust me, do you not?"

She felt that with her cousin the only way was to attack the subject boldly, for the girl always took refuge in fence and subterfuge when it was possible.

Dulcie shot a frightened glance at her, but did not answer.

Reine sat down and took her hand.

"My dear," she said, softly, "what is to become of your future? You are very unhappy: your poor mother is almost distracted about you: you cannot go on in the way you are doing now."

"Mamma is heartless and cruel," cried Dulcie, bursting into tears. "I only wish I could get away from her."

"Then, my dear child, why did you not get away when you had the opportunity? I will tell you at once that I know about your marriage; then there need be no disguise between us."

Dulcie hid her face and continued to weep. The most trying person of all to deal with is the one who declines to enter into a discussion, but leaves you to have all the conversation to yourself.

Reine was not daunted: knowing her cousin's peculiar

disposition, she continued to hold one of her hands, and went on speaking very gently :

"You know, dear child, you must have been very much attached to Mr. Trevor before you could agree to such a serious step as a clandestine marriage with him ; and if, poor fellow, he has done nothing since to forfeit your regard, as indeed he has had no opportunity of doing, it is unreasonable that you should take a dislike to him without cause."

Dulcie answered not a word.

"Surely," Reine continued, after giving her an opportunity to speak, of which she did not avail herself, "surely if you loved him ten months ago you might get to care for him again ; he is quite devoted to you : and would it not be better to be with him than to lead this life, which is most distressing both to yourself and to your mother ?"

At last Dulcie opened her lips.

"I wish I was dead !" she said, bitterly.

"But, my dear, there is no chance of your dying. What you have to do is to try and make the best of your life. You cannot get away from the fact that you are married to Mr. Trevor. It is your duty to be with him ; and why should you not be happy and make him happy, instead of making yourself and him miserable ? And you know, Dulcie, it is hopeless as well as wrong to allow yourself to dwell on the thought of any other man."

"I do not," cried Dulcie, with more energy than she had yet shown.

"I am afraid," said Reine, softly, "that you have given the impression that you are not quite indifferent to Mr. Temple."

Dulcie averted her eyes, but said nothing.

"Think," pleaded Reine, "how painful all this must be for your poor mother ! You should not forget, dear, how devoted she has been to you all her life. Try, for a moment, to put yourself in her place. Think what she must have felt when she discovered your marriage,—what a blow to all her hopes,—how bitter to know that her only child could so deceive her !"

Dulcie listened in moody silence : she would neither reply nor defend herself.

"Think," pursued Reine, after a moment's pause, "what



an embarrassing position it is for her to take about an apparently eligible daughter who attracts attention and admiration, and to feel that she is aiding a deception. Think of her annoyance last winter when Mr. Temple persisted in regarding her as the wilful destroyer of his hopes. Think of her vexation every time a fresh suitor appears. There is Mr. Lister now making himself unhappy about you. If he knew the truth he would not have thought of you for a moment. Remember that your mother is a woman with a very strong sense of honor, and all this dissimulation is extremely painful and annoying to her."

Still no answer. Reine began to get a little impatient, but struggled to conceal it, and spoke more kindly still.

"Dear Dulcie, you know this state of things cannot go on: you have no right to make your mother miserable."

Dulcie burst out at last:

"All I want is to get away from her. Why cannot I live with Anna Leslie? I would rather be a governess than go on living with mamma."

"You forget how people talk," answered Reine. "What would they say if you, the only child of a devoted mother, left her house and went to live elsewhere?"

"Mamma hates me," said Dulcie; "I know she does. And it is only because I have disappointed her ambition. She was always dinning it into my ears that a girl ought to make a good marriage. But for that I dare say I should never have been tempted to do what I did. It was all her fault."

"No," replied Reine, firmly, "it was not your mother's fault. It is quite natural that she should wish you to marry well."

"She would not let me see Noel. She made me write and tell him that I was not to see him again."

"And now," Reine could not resist saying, "it is you who will not see him. Perhaps your mother was not so wrong in not attributing any great importance to your fancy for him."

Dulcie turned away pettishly.

"Oh, of course if you take mamma's part it is no good my saying anything more. Every one is against me." And she subsided into tears again.

There was no more to be said after this. Reine tried in

vain to pacify her, and soon after took her leave, with the unpleasant consciousness of having utterly failed in her mission. Jack was waiting to escort her home.

"Have you seen Miss Vernon?" he asked, eagerly, as they walked together down the drive.

"Yes," said Reine, assuming a light-hearted air that she was far from feeling. "We have had a little talk together. I think her depression is caused by some little worry of which I cannot tell you, but which is not connected with the cause you supposed."

Jack felt a shade disappointed. He did not think that Mrs. Chandos was trying to throw dust in his eyes, but he did think that her cousin had deceived her, for he could not forget the scene in the garden and Lister's account of what he had witnessed. But he had far too much gentlemanlike feeling to insist, and, seeing that Mrs. Chandos showed no disposition to confide in him, he said, cheerily,—

"I hope it will be all right, and that she will soon get over her worries. It is wonderful how small things can vex one sometimes."

Reine thoroughly appreciated his delicacy of feeling in seeming to fall in with her views, and they chatted away amicably together as they pursued their way to the dower-house. She was fast coming round to the good opinion of him which she affected to deride in her friend, and contrasted him constantly in her mind with those other two men at whose hands she had suffered so much,—her father selfish, exacting, irritable, her husband violent and coarse. Both these had had their home manner and their company manner, like a good many more of their sex,—could be delightful in society and keep their ill temper for home consumption; but Sir John was always the same,—kind, cheery, anxious for the comfort of those about him, and thoroughly unselfish. He was as courteous to his mother and sister as to every other lady, and betrayed none of the rude familiarity, the oblivion of small politeness, with which some sons and brothers distinguish between the women who belong to them and those who are not of their kin. That evening the party from the dower-house dined at the Hall, and quite accidentally some wrong impressions were given to several of the company.

It happened that Lilah had one of her headaches and was not well enough to appear at dinner. Reine, who felt particularly sorry for the poor little invalid, and whose sympathetic nature made her ever anxious to soothe and relieve suffering, asked permission to go and see her.

"I have been thought," she said to Mrs. Chester, "to have some mesmeric power in my fingers, and once or twice I have been successful in alleviating pain."

Mrs. Chester hesitated, divided between the desire not to seem unappreciative of her guest's kindness and the fear that Lilah might decline with scant graciousness to receive a comparative stranger. She thanked Reine cordially first, and then said, with some diffidence,—

"Poor dear Lilah is a little inclined to be fretful in her suffering. I hope you will not be vexed if she——"

Here Mrs. Chester paused.

"I will come away at once," interposed Reine, "if my presence seems unwelcome to her."

Mrs. Chester led the way to Lilah's pretty sitting-room, which it was her great pleasure to adorn and decorate. It was full of pretty things, contributed, for the most part, by her mother and brother.

She was lying on a couch, looking wan and weary, her brows contracted by suffering, and an expression of querulous discontent on her poor little white face. She was not asleep, but, as the door opened softly, she did not uncloset her eyes, but gave herself a pettish twist expressive of resentment at the intrusion, although she was wont to be extremely indignant if she fancied herself forgotten or neglected. She thought it was her mother and Grace, and vouchsafed them no notice. Reine stole softly to the back of the couch and laid her fingers gently on the hot brow.

"Who is that?" cried Lilah, opening her eyes wide in an instant. Reine did not remove her hand. Mrs. Chester looked a little frightened. She feared Lilah was going to be ungracious.

"It is I," whispered Reine, softly.

Lilah did not shake off the touch, as her mother expected, but merely sighed and said,—

"Ah, I knew it was different from any one I was used to." Then, after a minute, "Thank you: I like it."



Reine continued to pass her slim fingers lightly to and fro on, not over, the brow and head of the little sufferer, and gradually the weary, discontented expression died out of Lilah's face, to the unspeakable delight and gratitude of the mother. When Reine saw that her charm was working, she whispered to Mrs. Chester,—

"Will you not go back to the drawing-room and leave me here?"

"I am so afraid of your tiring yourself," replied Mrs. Chester, with divided feelings of gratitude and politeness.

"I can go on for hours without getting tired," said Reine. "You see it is no effort: I scarcely move my arm."

"Yes, mother, go," interrupted Lilah. "And don't let *any one* come in. I think I shall go to sleep."

Mrs. Chester prepared to obey.

"Do not send any one until I ring or go down to the drawing-room," urged Reine; and Mrs. Chester, with whispered thanks, retired on tiptoe.

In twenty minutes, Lilah was fast asleep; but still Reine remained at the head of the couch, almost imperceptibly moving her fingers to and fro. Nothing in the world gave her so much pleasure as to soothe pain: it was long since she had spent so pleasant an evening as this, in the darkened chamber, with Lilah sleeping serenely under her touch.

Meantime Mrs. Chester was on tenter-hooks in the drawing-room lest Mrs. Chandos should be tiring herself, and it required the strongest assurances from Mrs. Herbert that if there was one occupation more delightful to her friend than another, it was the one in which she was at present engaged. As for Jack, his heart was suffused with delight and tenderness at the thought of this divine trait of goodness in his idol: would not his mother soon come round to his way of thinking when it was proved to her what an angel Mrs. Chandos was? He was seated next Dulcie, playing a round game, and the joy that was in his heart smiled in his face, and he looked so tenderly at and spoke so softly to her that three of the party present gave him credit for entertaining feelings for Dulcie which were really bestowed on Reine. A pang shot through poor Gracie's jealous heart, Henry Bertram said

to himself that, for once, Mrs. Herbert's penetration had been at fault, and Mrs. Chester hugged herself with a delighted belief that he was at last awaking to the attractions of this dear girl. Her affection for Dulcie had never wavered: she had always thought of her as a suitable and charming wife for her dear son. As time wore on and Mrs. Chandos did not make her appearance, Mrs. Chester, after fidgeting about a good deal, went up again to Lilah's room, in spite of her prohibition.

Gentle as was her entrance, Lilah unclosed her eyes, but not peevishly or fretfully this time. Her face wore a smile.

"Oh, I have had such a beautiful sleep!" she said, and, raising herself on her elbow, she turned to look at Reine.

"How kind you are! my headache is quite gone. Thank you so much! Will you kiss me?"

Reine kissed her very kindly.

"I am so glad, my dear, to have done you good. When your head aches again, you must send for me."

Mrs. Chester could scarcely find words in which to express her gratitude, she was so happy about both her children to-night, and they were the one thought and care of her existence.

Lilah made Reine promise that she would come very soon again to see her, and kissed her once more at parting,—a very unusual show of affection on the part of the little invalid.

The card-party had broken up when Reine entered the drawing-room, and Mrs. Herbert's carriage was just being announced.

"It is such a glorious night!" said Reine. "Mia, should you mind if I were to walk home with Henry?"

"Really, my dear, I hardly know," laughed Mrs. Herbert. "It is moonlight, and you are so romantic."

"Don't you think Henry's prosaicism will counterbalance my romance?" asked Reine, gayly.

"Perhaps," assented her friend. "Well, I suppose I must give my consent."

As Jack was putting Mrs. Chandos's cloak round her, he whispered, with enthusiasm,—

"How good you have been to poor little Lilah! How can we thank you enough?"

All his admiration came streaming through his blue eyes, and Reine would indeed have been blind had she failed to observe it. The clasp in which he held her hand told even more tales.

Mrs. Chandos was not altogether displeased. She had begun to feel a very sincere liking for the kind-hearted, amiable young fellow.

Jack stood on the steps, looking longingly and rather sadly after the retreating figures of Bertram and Reine. He would have given worlds to have walked back with them, but was deterred from offering his company by the fear of seeming intrusive. He was not jealous of Bertram now, and thought him the best fellow in the world, but in his honest, diffident heart he could not help feeling a painful consciousness of his own inferiority to the clever man of the world, and thinking how very much more congenial Bertram's companionship must be to Mrs. Chandos than his own.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

LILAH could talk of nothing but Mrs. Chandos and her marvellous mesmeric powers. She made the various members of the household try their hands at mesmerizing her, but dismissed them all with impatient contempt. Johnnie, she declared, had the nearest approach to the mesmeric touch, but he was leagues away from Mrs. Chandos. We may imagine how delighted he was at this compliment, and with what pleasure he sat and listened to Lilah's praises of his dear lady. He did not say very much in response: the fact was, he was afraid of saying too much.

Two or three days later Mrs. Chandos again paid a visit to Lilah in her boudoir, by particular request of the young lady,—not to exercise the office of healing medium on this occasion, but to have what Lilah called a nice talk.

"I have a great favor to ask you," said the girl, when Reine had been with her a few minutes,—"*a great favor*. Dear Mrs. Chandos, will you promise to grant it?"

"I think I may promise," smiled Reine. "I do not suppose you would ask anything very impossible of me."



Lilah lowered her voice, and said, coaxingly,—

“I want to read your poetry. Will you lend it to me?”

Reine hesitated. She felt that she could not comply with this request, and for the first time she thought struck her unpleasantly that she would not like this young girl to read what she had written. She had been indignant with critics who had found fault with the moral tone of her verses; she had declared that it was absurd to suppose that authors and poets were to be trammelled in their writings by the consideration whether what they wrote was suited to school-girls; but at this moment it smote her sharply to think that her poetry was not what she would care to put into Lilah's hands.

Lilah saw her hesitation, and said, quickly,—

“You are thinking that mamma would not like it. But mamma is not to know. She has such old-fashioned ideas, and thinks everything dreadful. But,” confidentially, “I have read heaps of things she does not know of. I found a volume of Swinburne's poems once in a hotel,—some one had left it behind,—and I took it to bed with me and read every word. Oh, it was lovely; but I am quite sure yours could not be half so improper as those, could they?”

“My dear,” said Reine, gravely, without replying to the latter part of Lilah's remarks, “I could not think of lending you my poems if your mother disapproves of them. But how do you know that she does? Has she read them?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Lilah. “She got them at Nice, and was in an awful state of mind about them. I don't mind telling you, because it will make you laugh. She was in the greatest fright that Johnnie was going to fall in love with you, and she thought you did not believe in anything and would take him headlong to perdition, and they had an awful scene about it. You know I would not tell you this, only I thought it would amuse you, because, of course, though we think there is no one like our dear, darling Johnnie, you would not look at him, because he is not clever like you.”

One might have imagined that, as Lilah was a shrewd little person, she would have been aware that her words could not inspire any very pleasurable emotion in the breast of her hearer; but there was a curious little twist

in her nature that made it agreeable to her to shoot occasional arrows at friends as well as foes.

Reine experienced one of the most disagreeable sensations she had ever known in her life. To feel that she was looked upon in such a light by so excellent, if narrow-minded, a woman as Mrs. Chester, was mortifying to her in the extreme, conscious as she was of her own purity and rectitude of intention and principle. To be regarded in the light in which it was evident Mrs. Chester regarded her was a bitter blow both to her vanity and her heart. It cost her one of the greatest efforts she had ever made in her life to smile and assume a tolerably indifferent tone as she said,—

“I am very sorry, my dear, but, under the circumstances, I cannot possibly do what you ask. I would on no account lend you any book without your mother’s sanction, far less one of which you tell me she disapproves so strongly.”

Lilah had a suspicion that she had been indiscreet, and tried to make amends.

“I hope you are not vexed,” she said. “I ought not to have said anything about it. But mamma is so dreadfully religious and so strict in her ideas that she thinks every one who does not believe the Bible right through from beginning to end must be lost. I have often,” looking a little frightened at her own words, “thought there were things in it which were unnatural and contradicted each other, and, oh! I should so like to talk about it to some one clever who understands these things. Life is so unfair and hard on some people: I don’t see how one can be expected to think it is all right, and to be thankful for one’s misery.”

“My dear child,” said Reine, compassionately, “if you do not want to be very unhappy, do not encourage doubts or begin to ask questions. Believe what you have believed and been taught in your childhood, or you will prepare a great deal of misery for yourself. We poor mortals cannot discover the truth for ourselves, and we are far more likely to be happy if we submit our judgment, even a little against the grain sometimes, than if we insist on knowing, or rather trying to know, the why and wherefore of everything. We never shall know it; no one has ever known it; and a hundred clever minds will evolve a hundred dif-

ferent theories from a lifetime of research. Few women can swim out boldly into the sea of speculation: most of us only succeed in wetting our feet with the little waves on the shore and making ourselves thoroughly uncomfortable."

"When did you first begin to have doubts?" asked Lilah, eagerly; but Mrs. Chandos refused altogether to continue the discussion. She was extremely glad when, a few minutes later, Mrs. Herbert came into the room with Grace, and soon afterwards they took their leave. During the remainder of the afternoon, and at dinner, Reine was silent and *distracte*: truth to tell, Lilah's arrow was rankling terribly in her mind. Mrs. Herbert saw that something had vexed her friend, but made no remark, hoping that Reine would tell her what was passing in her mind. When they were sitting together in the veranda, and Reine still made no sign, she said,—

"It is not kind of you, my love, to have secrets from me. What has vexed you?"

Reine did not answer for a moment; then she said, with a ruffled gesture,—

"Yes, I am vexed.—horribly vexed. It is, I dare say, a very slight and unimportant matter; perhaps it is only my vanity that is hurt, but it is hurt, and I cannot help feeling annoyed and disgusted." Then, with a slight increase of color in her cheek, she repeated to her friend what Lilah had said.

Mrs. Herbert was extremely indignant.

"I never liked that girl," she said. "She is a spiteful little cat, and always has her claws out ready to scratch."

"Poor little thing!" said Reine, kindly. "I do not for a moment suppose she meant to hurt me."

"Nonsense!" returned Mrs. Herbert. "She is anything but stupid, and it is only very stupid people who hurt the feelings of others without being aware of it. I have not the smallest doubt that jealousy prompted her in what she said."

"Indeed, dear Mia, I think you are too hard on her. It was a little want of tact, perhaps, but nothing more. I really cannot help laughing," but she looked more angry than amused, "at the idea of that excellent woman being alarmed lest her son should be entrapped by such a dan-



gerous creature as myself. It is something new to me to be looked upon as a sort of *Scarlet Lady*."

And Reine gave an abrupt, contemptuous little laugh, quite unsuggestive of mirth. She was working herself up into a state of anger and felt the want of a victim. Her strong sense of justice passed into abeyance for the time.

"I beg, Mia, that you will not invite Sir John here again whilst I remain. You see, you little know what daggers you have been planting in the breast of his worthy mother. Fancy me in the rôle of seducer and corrupter of an innocent young country squire."

By this time she was very angry, and Mrs. Herbert had a melancholy presentiment that all her little ingenious schemes had been overthrown by the odious sister of her favorite. She, too, felt the want of a victim, and made Lilah hers. She resolved then and there to give Sir John a hint of the mischief which Lilah had worked.

"Do not talk such nonsense, my dear," she said, with some sharpness. "The girl exaggerated: in fact, I dare say she invented the whole story. Nothing, I am sure, could be more cordial than the manner in which Mrs. Chester spoke to me of you and your kindness to Lilah."

Reine did not answer for some time: then she said, looking away into the distance and speaking in a thoughtful voice,—

"After all, perhaps it was a mistake to have published those poems. I dare say they have done me a great deal of harm and given people very wrong ideas about me. Imagine," with a smile which had more bitter than sweet in it, "a very religious elderly woman, with all the correct old-fashioned opinions, sitting down in cold blood to pronounce judgment upon my poor '*Verses from the South*,' written at fever-heat of passionate misery, the outcome of a vivid imagination worked up to its highest pitch! No! I see it now. The folly was not, perhaps, in writing them, because it gave me a kind of relief and happiness, but in sending them out to the world. Mia, you are a sensible woman,—why did you not advise me against publishing them?"

"Why should I have done so?" retorted Mrs. Herbert. "They are charming and full of genius, and they have given you fame."

"Fame worth having!" exclaimed Reine, bitterly. "A handle to every ill-natured person to accuse me of immorality and infidelity, and to make a really good woman look with dread and horror upon my possible influence over her son. No! I will do to-morrow what I have often thought of doing before; I will buy up all that are to be bought, and make them into a bonfire."

"You talk like a pettish child," returned Mrs. Herbert. "I hope you will do nothing of the sort."

But the very next day Mrs. Chandos, without saying a word to her friend, wrote and gave the order for the calling in of her poems.

Mrs. Herbert did her utmost to soothe Reine's ruffled plumage, but she was perfectly conscious of her want of success and sorely vexed about it. She was more vexed still to observe the change in Reine's manner to Sir John when he next came to the dower-house. He, poor fellow, had been so exulting in her altered demeanor to him of late, and was stupefied when he perceived this lapse into a colder and more indifferent manner than she had ever shown him before.

"What have I done?" he cried, in despair, the moment he was left alone with Mrs. Herbert. "How is it possible that I can have offended Mrs. Chandos?"

Mrs. Herbert, as she had resolved, told him what Lilah had said to Reine. She really hoped that he would give the little mischief-maker a severe lecture on her indiscretion and malice.

Poor Jack sat stupefied with misery and indignation. To think that Mrs. Chandos, whom he placed on so exalted a pedestal, should have been wounded and insulted by a member of his family; that she at whose feet he humbly worshipped, in full consciousness of his own inferiority, should have been given to understand that she was not thought worthy of him! No words could express his bitter mortification. Most men, under the circumstances, would not have rested until they had wreaked their wrath on the person who had injured them; but Jack knew that he could say nothing to Lilah in anger: whatever she did, her weakness and suffering must shield her from any outbreak of wrath on his part.

Mrs. Herbert said everything in her power to soothe

and comfort him: she was quite vexed to see with what dreadful seriousness he took the matter, as though he then and there abandoned hope forever.

"What *must* she think of us!" he reiterated, as though Reine were a sovereign and he and his family had been found guilty of *lèse-majesté*.

"She will forget it," said Mrs. Herbert. "Reine has a generous mind and is not at all vindictive."

But Jack was not to be comforted. It seemed impossible that she should ever forgive such a wanton insult. For the first time he shrank from seeing her, and resolutely declined Mrs. Herbert's invitation to stay to lunch.

Mrs. Herbert could not forbear telling Reine of his distress, and the latter lady said, not without warmth,—

"My dear Mia, I really think that for once you have been wanting in tact to tell Sir John anything about the matter."

"Perhaps," retorted her friend, "you are not aware how chilling your manner was to the poor fellow. No one could help remarking it, and he asked me what it meant the moment you left the room."

"I should be sorry," said Reine, with a touch of temper, "if he imagined that I cared the very least what either he or his family think of me."

"You are not generally unjust," rejoined Mrs. Herbert, "and it is unjust to punish a man who is devoted to you for what a peevish, disagreeable little girl said."

Mrs. Herbert paused, afraid she had gone too far in speaking of Jack's devotion.

But Mrs. Chandos did not appear to have remarked the expression.

Meantime, poor Jack was utterly miserable. So miserable was he that the habitual cheery expression completely deserted his face, and it was patent to every one at the hall that some dreadful misfortune had befallen him.

Lilah had a sort of frightened intuition of what had happened, and, fearful of explanations, forbore to remark his dejection; but his mother was seriously concerned, and cast wistful glances at him from time to time. In the evening, no longer able to bear the suspense, she waited up after every one else had retired, and went to seek him in his own room.



"My dearest boy," she said, tremulously, all her motherly affection gleaming in her eyes, "I fear something has happened to distress you. Pray, my dear," laying a hand tenderly on his arm, "if you have any trouble, do not keep it from me! Who can feel for you like your mother?"

Jack was not so much touched by this tender appeal as he might have been under other circumstances. He could not forget that it was through his mother, if indirectly, that this trouble had come upon him.

He did not answer for a moment; then, as she urged him, he said, in a colder tone than she had ever heard from his lips,—

"It is very hard that my own family should take it upon themselves to insult the woman I love best in the world."

The words contained a double blow to Mrs. Chester. The first was the intimation that he, after all, loved Mrs. Chandos; the second, the horror of any one having been insulted by her or hers.

"Insulted!" she exclaimed, trembling with agitation. "What can you possibly mean?"

The most veracious people, we know, are tempted to exaggerate at times, and it is possible that Mrs. Herbert unconsciously added a little to Reine's recital. Jack, carried away by his feelings, made the most of what had been told him, and poor Mrs. Chester was positively appalled to think that Lilah should have dared to repeat to Mrs. Chandos her opinion of that lady's poetry and her fears for her son. She felt thoroughly humiliated, and scarcely knew what to say to Jack, who stood looking at her with a disturbed and angry face.

"Indeed!" cried the poor lady, at last. "I could not have believed Lilah capable of behaving in so improper and unfeeling a manner. I shall tell her very plainly my opinion of her conduct, and I must think what apology I can make to Mrs. Chandos for the insult that has been offered her under my roof."

"No, mother," said Jack, decisively. "Say nothing to Lilah. She is a great sufferer. I do not think we can hold her accountable like other people. And, after all," with some bitterness,— "it was true. You said all that, and more, about Mrs. Chandos."

His mother was silent. She could not deny it, but she was extremely anxious not to irritate her son or increase his trouble.

"You must indeed be hard to please," he went on, with some excitement: "a woman who is as good and kind as an angel, and the most perfect and pure-minded lady that ever breathed."

Poor Mrs. Chester dared not say, as she would fain have done, that these qualities availed nothing against the absence of religion in a woman. Though, since she had seen more of Reine and observed that she went to church and behaved with great apparent reverence and devoutness when there, her prejudice had been considerably shaken. Still, she could not forget that Mrs. Chandos had written poetry she disapproved of; that she had been divorced from her husband, absolutely blameless though she was in the matter; and that she was very nearly her son's age,—all of which circumstances made her in the mother's opinion a most undesirable wife for him.

But she would not vex him now by discussing these objections, and contented herself by expressing extreme regret for what had happened; and finally they parted outwardly on friendly terms but inwardly sore at heart.

Jack, who was wont to sleep from the moment he laid down his head on his pillow until he was called, passed a troubled night. By morning he had resolved that, however difficult and painful the task, he would express to Mrs. Chandos his grief and regret for the insult she had received.

He went down to the dower-house soon after breakfast, intending to ask for an interview with Reine. But when he drew near the house he saw her seated alone under the cedar with a book in her hand. As he approached her and she read his suffering in his face, her kind heart was touched, and she received him pleasantly.

He sat down beside her, and she made some trifling general remark with a view of putting him at his ease. He did not answer it: his heart was full of what he had come to say, though his tongue would not all at once give utterance to it. Suddenly he turned to her, the color flushing to his face.

"Mrs. Chandos," he stammered, "I am not clever at

words, you must forgive me if I speak bluntly, but I have never in my life been so cut up as at hearing that my sister had said such unpardonable things to you. Poor little girl! I cannot think she meant any harm, and you are so good and kind that I beg and pray you to forgive her, because you know she is not quite like other people."

Reine put out her hand frankly to him.

"Do not say another word!" she said, smiling a kind, reassuring smile. "I have forgotten it, and am only vexed that you should ever have heard of it."

"Oh!" gasped Jack, covering her hand with kisses, "you are an angel! But I cannot forget it. To think that you, whom I love and respect more than any woman in the world,—yes," as Reine made a warning gesture,— "yes," passionately, "it must come out! I know I am nothing to you. I know it would be presumption and madness for me ever to think of you, except as some one far above me and out of my reach; but that does not prevent my loving and worshipping you with all my soul. Do not be angry with me!" as she drew her hand away: "I expect nothing, I hope for nothing, but I beseech you to let me be your friend, your slave,—anything, so that I may sometimes see you and be near you."

"Do not say any more!" uttered Reine, very gently and kindly. "You shall always be my friend. But now I want to tell you something which I hope will make you happier in your mind. I have never been very proud of my poetry, and I have often thought it might give people a wrong impression about me. I could see after you had read it that you did not approve of it."

He would have protested, but she silenced him by a gesture.

"And I can quite understand," she went on, "that it horrified your mother. It was written when I was suffering acutely and looked at things very likely in a morbid and distorted way. Writing soothed me at the time, but I have come to the conclusion that it was a mistake to publish those poems. I wrote yesterday and ordered that all the copies that can be procured are to be bought and sent to me. They will soon be forgotten; and that is the best fate for them."

Jack looked at her in mingled wonder and admiration.



He felt no inclination to dissuade her from such a step: nay, he rejoiced to think that alien eyes should not in the future read the impassioned words she had once written.

Reine knew by intuition what was passing in his mind, and, if it gave a slight wound to her vanity, she felt no resentment against him, recognizing as she did the truth and honesty of his heart.

How he longed at that moment to pour forth all his devotion and adoration before her! The most extravagant words would have seemed inadequate to express what he felt; but he had so great an awe of her, so deep a consciousness of his own inferiority, that he dared not let his lips plead for him. But his eyes were eloquent enough, and Reine was rather relieved at this juncture by the sight of Mrs. Herbert coming towards them across the lawn.

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## CHAPTER XXX.

DECEMBER had come: Dulcie was again on a visit to the Fawcetts, and this time, as before, without her mother. They had been little together since they left the Hall, for the strain of their relations had become intolerable to both, and Mrs. Vernon preferred to risk the remarks of her friends, to living in a constant state of irritation and fear. Dulcie had spent the greater part of the autumn with Mrs. Leslie, who, always kind and cheery, felt very sorry for the girl and did her best to amuse and comfort her; and, after that, she had paid visits to one or two intimate friends. The elder of Mrs. Fawcett's daughters had recently married, and Mary, the younger, who had always been fond of Dulcie, was delighted to have her to replace the sister whose companionship she missed so much.

Dulcie was unquestionably improved by her sorrows. She had always been gentle and amiable, but now she seemed more thoughtful, more sympathetic: there was less of the butterfly about her.

"I used," Mrs. Fawcett confided to her husband, "to think Dulcie rather silly and flighty; but she has improved amazingly since last year. I wish she and Charlie

would take a fancy to each other. She will have a thousand a year when she comes of age, and more than treble that when her mother dies."

"It would be very handy for Charlie," replied her lord; "but I fear it is too great a bit of luck to come off."

It was a fatality that people would always insist on marrying and giving Dulcie in marriage; but it was hardly an exceptional case, for if a girl is pretty, good-tempered, and has a nice little fortune, she is likely to have as many candidates for her hand as Solomon had wives.

Mary Fawcett and Dulcie, being great friends, always performed together the rite of brushing out their hair over each other's bedroom fires, as is the wont of friends.

On the evening when we meet Dulcie again after three months' absence, Mary came into her room waving a silver brush in the delightful excitement consequent on having a piece of interesting news to communicate.

"Oh, Dulcie! I have just been hearing such a bit of news from Charlie! It is a profound secret: he made me swear not to tell any one, but of course I made a mental reservation in favor of you. He does not want father and mother to know, though it is bound to come out before very long. You remember that young Trevor who was staying here last winter? I used to think he was rather fond of you."

It was convenient that Dulcie could use her hair as a veil to screen from her friend's eyes the blush that covered her face at the abrupt mention of a name connected with such painful ideas and fraught with such bitter memories.

"He really is dreadfully unlucky. You know what an awful accident he had in the winter,—was thrown out of a hansom and all but killed; and now he has got into the most fearful scrape in India and will have to leave the regiment."

Dulcie's heart beat fast. Mary had paused, apparently expecting some sign of interest from her auditor.

"Well?" said Dulcie, interrogatively, still keeping her hair over her face and making vigorous pretence of brushing.

"Well," returned Mary, "it seems that he went out to India in the same ship with his colonel's wife. Charlie has met her. She is a fair, sentimental sort of woman,

he says, a tremendous flirt, but a good deal older than Noel, and rather good-looking,—made up very well, at least. And there has been an awful row, and the colonel has applied for a divorce, and Noel is to be co-respondent."

Dulcie could not utter a word. Conflicting feelings were chasing each other through her mind. She did not know whether to be glad, sorry, indignant, or disgusted. She had fancied that he was too devoted to her to care for any other woman; but, with a bitter recollection of Alwyne, she supposed men were all alike,—a month was long enough for them to forget one woman in and to take up with another. Perhaps, now, she would be able to free herself from him, and, strange to say, the thought did not give her the rapture that one might have expected. I am not sure that in her heart she did not feel a slightly-increased respect for and interest in her husband.

Mary had paused, and was evidently disappointed that Dulcie did not take more interest in this very exciting piece of gossip.

"You don't seem surprised!" she said, in rather a mortified tone.

"I am never surprised at anything a man does," replied Dulcie; "that is, if it is anything bad."

"Good gracious!" cried Mary, opening her eyes. "The idea of your talking like that! As if you had ever had any experience of their badness!"

"Oh, one hears enough," returned Dulcie. "Here is an instance. This man that everybody thought so nice goes and does the meanest thing possible,—pretended, I dare say, to take care of her on the way out, and then—that is the end of it—he gets the wretched woman into trouble and ruins her life."

Dulcie was surprised herself at the angry vehemence with which she spoke.

"Charlie says," resumed Mary, "that he believes it was all her doing. He says Noel wasn't that sort, but she was known to be a regular flirt, and he thinks very likely her husband wanted to get rid of her, and that it is a plant. Now I suppose, poor fellow, he'll have to marry her; and a nice thing that will be for him, to be tied to a woman years older than himself. He will have to leave the regiment, which will be an awful blow to him; and



Charlie hears that he is coming home and going to exchange."

"Did your brother tell you anything more?" asked Dulcie, in rather a husky voice.

"No: he did not know any more. He has not heard from Noel himself, but thinks he is sure to write, as they are such friends. Very likely, poor fellow, he is not quite right in his head yet: they thought at one time he never would be. You know he came to our party in the season and had a fit there and was obliged to be taken home in a cab. I think you had left, though, before it happened."

"Yes, I believe we had two or three parties that night," answered Dulcie, hastily, for veracity, as we know, was not her strong point.

"Anyhow, *his* career is done for," said Mary, regretfully. "If he had been rich or a swell he might have got out of it; but, as it is, he hasn't a chance."

Dulcie sat over the fire long after her friend left her that night, wondering what would happen. The divorce, she supposed, would come on in England, and perhaps all would come out about Noel being a married man, and her name would be dragged in. She felt dreadfully perturbed in her mind, and would have given the world to have had some friend to confide in and of whom she could ask counsel. She was indignant against Noel: it was the first time she had recognized the fact that he belonged to her. He had pretended at Brighton to be broken-hearted about her, and a month later he could console himself with a married woman. And he was coming back to England! Well, in any case, after this he would not dare to approach her: that was one comfort.

But Dulcie felt wounded in spirit. Little less than a year ago both he and Alwyne had seemed so passionately in love with her that it had appeared impossible they should think of any other woman; and now one was married and apparently devoted to his wife, and the other had ruined his career for the sake of a woman who, according to Mary's account, was neither young nor in any way desirable. She was glad, Dulcie told herself, with unusual bitterness of feeling, that she was cut off from any more intimate relations with men in the future, and not likely to suffer from their treachery and changeableness. Of

course after this she would never have anything to say to Noel. Perhaps if he had not behaved in this shameful way she might in time have been reconciled to the idea of being his wife, but now he had by his own act put that utterly out of the question. Dulcie, who was not naturally vindictive, thought that she would like to have the opportunity of telling him what she thought of his behavior. It was a comfort that that horrid creature who had, no doubt, counted on marrying him would be disappointed. Dulcie went to bed extremely perturbed in her mind, and it was a long time before sleep came to soothe her angry and excited feelings. The wrong we do others and the wrong they do us present themselves to us in such very disproportionate lights.

Dulcie's visit to the Fawcetts came to an end without her hearing anything more of Noel or the impending divorce. If Mary heard anything she would be sure to tell her, Dulcie thought; and she was afraid of asking any question, for fear of exciting suspicion. She went to spend Christmas with Mrs. Leslie. Her mother was far from well: the nervous excitement and irritation of the last twelve months had preyed seriously on her spirits, and she had, besides, suffered for some weeks from a bronchial catarrh. She had begged Reine as a very great favor to accompany her, at all events for a month or two, to the south of France, and Reine had given up another engagement to comply with her request, feeling seriously concerned about her aunt's health and very sorry for her mental disquietude.

It had been arranged that Dulcie should divide her time during her mother's absence between Mrs. Leslie and the Fawcetts. It was alleged as the reason for her not accompanying Mrs. Vernon that she disliked being abroad, and that the climate of the Riviera had not suited her the previous winter.

Dulcie had not been long with Mrs. Leslie before she confided to her Noel's iniquity, and that sprightly lady took an immense interest in the recital, and reflected to herself that it was quite possible this shocking behavior on his part might pique Dulcie into taking more interest in him, even though at first it might be interest of an adverse kind. She made great allowances for him in her

own mind, which was perhaps a little too liberal and tolerant in her regard for masculine weakness. She said to herself,—

“But what on earth could the girl expect? He was devoted to her, and she treated him shamefully and told him plainly that her only desire in life was to get rid of him and marry another man; and yet she is surprised that after this he should presume to look at a woman, instead of spending the rest of his life in regretting her.” She put this in a mild way before Dulcie, who refused to admit any excuse for him, though perhaps in her own mind she may have been aware that Mrs. Leslie’s ideas were far from unreasonable.

Her meeting with Alwyne had had one beneficial result. She no longer thought of him in the romantic way that she had previously done, nor could she lay the flattering unction to her soul that he was indifferent to his wife or pining after her. She did not confide to Mrs. Leslie the meeting with Alwyne: her vanity was too sore on the subject, and perhaps her heart, for there is no question that she had given him all that she had of love.

She spent part of January with Mrs. Leslie at Brighton, and one morning when she had been alone to visit her aunt, who lived near Kemp Town, she, on leaving the house, crossed the road and seated herself on one of the embrasured seats overlooking the sea, similar to that on which the tragic little scene with Noel had been enacted. It was a still morning: the sky was a clear, pale blue, and the sun gleamed golden on the little rippling waves which a faint breeze stirred. Dulcie felt very lonely as she recalled the summer morning when she had been so hard to Noel because of his rival. Yes, she admitted that she had been hard to him, and she remembered for the first time, with a twinge of pity, how sad and miserable he had looked. And what was his offence? Could he help that dreadful accident which had caused him months of suffering? Then, just as she was growing to pity and to feel some softness towards him, she remembered with a flush about the colonel’s wife and how short a time it had taken him to console himself. She shut up her heart against him in a moment, and, rising abruptly, walked hastily home to rejoin Mrs. Leslie.



Mrs. Vernon had recovered from her bronchitis, but she did not intend returning to England before the end of March. She had met many pleasant friends at Cannes, and was thoroughly enjoying the life. Above all things she appreciated the relief of being away from Dulcie. She no longer felt angry or bitter against her,—she was thankful to hear that she was well and cheerful,—but she felt that for both their sakes it was better they should be apart until they could again take up the threads of life together. When she allowed her mind to dwell on the matter, which she very seldom did, the future looked as blank and impossible as ever. What was to be the end of it? and would “the wretched husband,” as she called Noel to herself, continue tamely to submit to being kicked out of his wife’s life, or would he at some time or other assert and vindicate his rights? She and Reine had talked it over once or twice; but, as neither knew anything of Noel’s nature and temperament, and both had been so entirely surprised by Dulcie’s unaccountable and unreasonable conduct, they could only indulge in speculations which they felt to be unprofitable.

Reine had left her aunt now, and was in Florence. Jack had confided to Mrs. Herbert the little scene that had taken place between him and Mrs. Chandos, and had, with a burning face, recounted his own temerity, and Mrs. Herbert had drawn not unfavorable augury from the fact that, after this rash act of his, Reine had not snubbed him nor treated him with haughtiness, but had been quite as friendly as before, if not more so. When she saw Reine, just before she went abroad, Jack’s champion ventured to say a word in his behalf, which Mrs. Chandos received with smiling toleration; but when her friend dwelt on the depths of his feelings the younger lady affected to make light of them and refused to discuss the subject seriously. Still, Mrs. Herbert saw indications that Reine was getting somewhat weary of a wandering life, and that she felt painfully at times the loneliness of her lot and a yearning towards the ties of home and family.

February had come, and Dulcie, according to promises exchanged, had returned to spend a month with the Fawcetts. The first week of her return the house was very quiet, but the one following there was to be a ball in the

house,—a country ball and a hunt ball: so that it would be a very gay time indeed. Charlie Fawcett was in London, and was to return on the Monday, bringing a couple of friends with him. Two young ladies were to arrive the same day, and the house would be full of guests. Mary was in great spirits, anticipating immense pleasure from the coming gayeties; and Dulcie, whose spirits were much improved of late, entered cheerfully into her friend's feelings, and was ready to talk about the coming festivities to Mary's heart's content.

Monday came, and Mrs. Fawcett with her daughter and Dulcie were in the morning-room after breakfast. She was writing a letter; the two girls were arranging flowers.

A telegram was brought in, and Mrs. Fawcett, having glanced over it, communicated its contents to her companions without turning her head.

"It is from Charlie," she said. "'Byng,'" reading aloud, "'cannot come. Have asked Trevor. Just back from India.'"

Dulcie trembled violently: she felt as if she must faint. Fortunately, Mary had run to look over her mother's shoulder to make quite sure that she had read the name correctly, and Dulcie had time to compose herself. A moment later she left the room and went up-stairs. She sat down in the nearest chair and looked vacantly into space. What should she do? How could she possibly avoid this dreadful meeting? It soon became obvious to her that she could not avoid it. It was impossible to make any plausible excuse for leaving the gayeties for which she had expressly come. Perhaps, she thought, Charlie would tell Noel that she was a guest in the house, and then, of course, if he had any gentlemanlike feeling, he would invent a pretext for staying away even at the last moment.

When she returned to the morning-room she found Mary alone.

"It is awfully daring of Charlie, I think," said the young lady, "to ask Mr. Trevor here under the circumstances. Mamma will be furious with him when she knows what has happened. I really wonder at him."

"Yes," returned Dulcie, with what calmness she could

muster. "And it is sure to come out sooner or later. Such a disgraceful affair, too!"

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

WE must retrace our steps in order to pick up one of the threads of the story and go back to poor Noel after his last interview with the wife who rejected and repudiated him. He was as nearly heart-broken as ever was a kind-hearted, affectionate young fellow who adored a woman in vain. All the delightful visions which had cheered his convalescent hours, of having his darling restored to his longing arms, were rudely shattered: in vain he reminded himself of his rights,—of the fact that she was his lawful wife, and that he could compel her to live with him. But the poor lad had not counted on a captive, an unwilling victim. Surely if any man ever had reason to believe that he was beloved for himself, it was, up to the moment of his terrible awakening, Noel. He was poor, of small social importance, and his bride had given up a happy, luxurious home for his sake, and had been ready to go with him into the wide world, to face poverty with him and to follow whatever fortune might be his.

Noel was too chivalrous of heart to lay the blame on her; indeed, it is very difficult to make a good-hearted young man believe anything against his idol: he was much more prone to believe that devilish arts and machinations had been practised on her guileless mind, either by Alwyne or her mother. She had probably, in the first place, been influenced against him, and had then fallen a prey to the man who now exercised this dreadful influence over her. And, as we know, these suspicions and surmises were not very wide of the mark.

There was only one thing for him to do now, and that was to get away. She was his; but he would not claim her, since she was unwilling: he had no taste for a woman who loathed and revolted against his caresses, he only hungered for her love. The future was a blank to him:



on what would happen in the days to come, he could not even attempt to speculate: the only thought which smiled upon him now was that in which he pictured the possibility of a soldier's death. Since he might not live for her, how gladly would he die for his love! But there was the bitterness of leaving her to another; and few men are heroic enough to efface themselves from a woman's life in order that she may repose happily on the breast of a rival. Sore indeed was the poor fellow's heart as he made arrangements to leave his country, and with it hope and all he had counted upon to make life dear. A draft of his regiment was on the eve of going out, and it happened that the officer appointed to take it had particular reason for wishing to remain in England, so the exchange was effected easily enough.

The first person he met on board ship was Mrs. Franklin, the wife of his colonel. Noel had never seen very much of her: he was aware that she had the reputation of being given to flirtation, and that her husband was reported to be jealous of her. Meeting her in his voyage out inspired him with no feeling of any kind: he was neither pleased nor sorry to find her his travelling-companion: all women save one were absolutely indifferent to him. It was not so with Mrs. Franklin. She could not exist without a squire to pay her attention and look after her comforts, and she at once determined that Noel should be her property and laid herself out to captivate him. She had been a very pretty woman, and still preserved her looks by the help of a little judicious recourse to art, not patent to the uncritical eye. She had a caressing and sympathetic manner, and, although she was really a heartless and selfish little woman, she was clever enough to make men believe her exactly what she chose to seem. She was annoyed to find this good-looking and well-mannered young man afflicted with melancholy; his sighs, his dejected appearance, his lack of interest in everything, bored her exceedingly; but, as she intended to enlist his services during the voyage, she reflected how best to gain an influence over him, and selected sympathy as the most suitable card to play on the occasion.

Noel was like a child in her hands: he was soon ready to dance to any tune which the clever little lady piped,

and after a few days he could not be happy out of her presence. For, by her pretence of sympathy, she had gradually drawn from him the story of his woes, and in time he confided to her everything except the name of the girl who had made him so profoundly miserable. He became cheerful and almost happy after indulging in the unspeakable relief of talking about his woes, for he had been forced, up to the present time, to keep them to himself. The story was sufficiently strange to be interesting, and Mrs. Franklin encouraged his confidences, and pretended ten times more interest in them than she really felt.

She had the same fair-haired, pretty, feminine type of beauty as Dulcie, and in some ways reminded Noel of his lost love, and he became so devoted to her that he was perpetually beside her, showing her the greatest attention, and anxious to anticipate her every wish. It was, therefore, not surprising that his behavior gave wrong impressions to people who witnessed it. Mrs. Franklin knew quite well that he was not in love with her, but it suited her vanity to let it be thought that he was her slave.

As for Noel, he felt the sincerest affection for the kind, pretty, tender-hearted little woman, as he thought her, and would have gone through fire and water to serve her, but love, love such as he felt for Dulcie, was furthest from his thoughts. There was no passion in the eyes with which he looked at her; his pulses never beat a shade faster at the touch of her hand; his feeling was the tranquil affection he might have had for a beloved sister.

Mrs. Franklin bestowed confidences on him in return,—gave him to understand that she was not appreciated by her lord, and evoked much sympathy from him by the narration of her grievances. She did not bring any serious charge against the colonel, as indeed a cleverer woman than she would have been puzzled to do. The friendly relations commenced on the passage out were carried on after their arrival in India. Noel continued to find his greatest happiness in the society of his colonel's wife, which he constantly sought. Being absolutely free from evil intent, he was unaware that the lady's reputation suffered from his attentions, but she, although not equally ignorant, did not discourage them, being piqued

into greater warmth of feeling for him by his want of passion for her. She wanted to conquer him and to make him forget Dulcie: it hurt her vanity that he should only regard her as a sister, and that she had no power over him more than friendship gives. A word, a signal, from Dulcie, and he would have had no eyes or ears for any other woman, but would have been ready to overleap any obstacle to get back to her.

People talked, as people talk everywhere but notably in India, and the colonel got an inkling of it, greatly to his displeasure. Men have different ways of showing and feeling jealousy: some hate the man whom they believe to be their rival, and feel comparatively little rancor towards the woman who causes their misery; others feel all the bitterness against the woman, and can be perfectly civil and behave with apparent unsuspectingness to the man whom she seems to favor. The latter was the colonel's case. He was furious with his wife, but perfectly civil and courteous to Noel, so that the subaltern never for a moment suspected the tornado that was threatening. He did not feel so kindly to his superior officer as he would have liked to do, because he believed him to be harsh and unkind to his wife; and Noel, being her avowed champion, could not bear the thought of any one vexing her, and was quite ready to fight her battles.

Mrs. Franklin was careful not to let him know that he was the cause of the frequent dissensions between herself and her husband, as she shrewdly suspected that he would at once insist on the misunderstanding being cleared up, as much out of justice to himself for Dulcie's sake, as for her own.

Late one evening Noel was sitting with Mrs. Franklin, and she was employed in confiding to him her sorrows,—the cruelty of her husband, and her own wretchedness, which she declared herself unable longer to endure. She wept; she was evidently grievously afflicted; and tender-hearted Noel was miserable at the sight of her tribulation and full of eager desire to console her. He drew his chair close beside her; he affectionately stroked and clasped the hand that she put in his; he was so full of tenderness and sympathy that it broke out into words of endearment.



"My poor little darling!" he said, moved to strong feeling. "I wish to God I could do something for you! Cannot I get you away from that brute!"

And with this, as he was in the act of kissing the hand he held, *that brute*, who, presumably, had been watching his opportunity, dashed in, aimed a blow at Noel which nearly upset him out of his chair, and prepared to follow it up with another, meantime looking like a madman and pouring forth the most opprobrious epithets on each of the pair.

Now, it may be all very well for a man with a guilty conscience to make a passive target of himself for the blows of an outraged husband, but Noel's conscience being as clear as the sun at noonday, he had no intention of submitting tamely to chastisement: he was, besides, much incensed against the colonel for his treatment of his wife. So he promptly got on his legs and showed fight, and, being young and athletic, was more than a match for his assailant.

Mrs. Franklin shrieked, and, at the sound of hurrying feet, the colonel, not wishing to be found engaged in combat with his subaltern, ceased his attack, and, pointing furiously to the door, desired Noel to be gone. But Noel absolutely refused to go until he received an explanation. It was fortunate that at this moment Major Black, who had been with the colonel in another part of the house, appeared upon the scene. He shrewdly surmised the cause of the affray, and, being well disposed to both men, was anxious to act as mediator.

Mrs. Franklin threw herself hysterically upon him.

"Oh, save me! save me! part them! part them!" she shrieked, in terror; and the major, thinking she would be better out of the way, escorted her trembling form to the door and begged her in a friendly tone to seek her own apartment.

"No, by G—!" roared the colonel. "She does not stop under my roof. She shall go out neck and crop with her lover here!"

Noel, meanwhile, stood his ground with considerable dignity, though the major made a friendly gesture with his head as though advising his departure.

"Certainly not," said Noel. "I do not stir from here

until I know the meaning of Colonel Franklin's behavior and the reason of his attack upon me."

The good-natured major reflected that, for a young one, Noel was a pretty cool hand.

The colonel swore in a manner appalling to listen to.

"You want an explanation!" he shouted, interlarding every word with an oath. "It is not enough that I find you sitting hand in hand with my wife and proposing to take her away from *'that brute,'* as you were good enough to call me!"

"If you heard me say that," said Noel, "you must have been listening at the door, which is not quite the action of a gentleman; and if you can behave like this before a woman who has not done the least harm in the world, I think it is high time she did leave you."

Here the colonel made a feint of rushing at Noel again, but the major interposed his portly person, for, like the major of tradition, he was portly.

"Come, come, colonel!" he said, "command yourself! And you," to Noel, "go,—there's a good fellow! I'll see you by and by."

"No," repeated Noel, with great determination, "I shall not stir from this room until the matter is cleared up. If the colonel imagines that I have done him any wrong, or that there is anything between Mrs. Franklin and myself, he is entirely mistaken. I have the greatest friendship for her, but I look upon her as though she were my sister, and if he saw me kiss her hand to-night, and heard me speak to her in a manner which he may think too familiar, it was nothing but sheer pity and sympathy at seeing her so distressed and unhappy."

Not only was the major staggered by Noel's coolness, but the colonel was equally so. He believed him to be brazening it out, and cried, furiously,—

"All right, sir. We will see what sort of account you give of yourself in the divorce court."

"Divorce court!" echoed Noel. "I think, sir, you must be out of your mind. I take my solemn oath before God that nothing but the purest friendship has ever existed between myself and Mrs. Franklin."

"Ha, ha! we shall see! we shall see!" roared the colonel.

"Now, Trevor," exclaimed the major, "for God's sake get out of this, like a good fellow. Come round to me presently."

And Noel, with his head well up, marched out, looking like anything but a guilty lover discovered.

The colonel was so violent about his wife when his subaltern had departed that the kind-hearted major was afraid to leave her under the same roof with him, and ended by carrying her off to his wife's protection. Meantime, he implored Franklin, for his own sake and the sake of the regiment, not to have a scandal, and declared that he would thoroughly investigate the matter and come round again in the morning.

The major was a good deal puzzled about Noel. He knew that he and Mrs. Franklin had been much talked about, and he did not in his own mind think they could be quite as innocent as the young man protested; but, after his high and lofty bearing, the major said to himself that he must either have spoken the truth or be the most thundering blackguard in creation.

He found Noel waiting for him on his return home.

"This is a bad business," said the major, shaking his head with a somewhat reproachful meaning in voice and gesture.

"Yes," replied Noel, "it is a very bad business for any woman to be tied to a maniac like that."

"Come, come," responded the major, "you had better get off the stilts with me. You know it is a devilish awkward position for both you and the lady. You cannot justify sitting hand in hand with her and abusing her husband to her behind his back!"

"Why, major," cried Noel, "what else could any man with a heart in his body do when he saw the dearest, kindest little woman in the world, the woman who had been his best friend in trouble, but try to comfort her?"

"My dear chap," retorted the major, "it is all very well, but a man is not allowed either by law or by public opinion to comfort another man's wife in that sort of way. And you must know quite well that you two have been a great deal talked about of late."

"Talked about!" uttered Noel, looking blank.

The major made an impatient gesture.



"You're a devilish good actor, Trevor," he said, "but if I am to be your friend you had better drop that sort of thing."

Noel looked half astonished, half indignant.

"I am not an actor, major, and never was one. Neither am I a liar."

"Well, well," said the good-natured major, "I cannot understand your being ignorant of what every one else knows. You have been like Mrs. Franklin's shadow ever since you came out; and of course it has made people talk. I don't say there has been any absolute harm,—I hope for everybody's sake there has not,—but when a man is always in a woman's pocket, people are bound to talk. Anyhow, the colonel has got wind of it, and, though he's a good-hearted fellow in the main, he's as jealous as the devil. And she's a regular little flirt. 'This is not the first time there has been a row.'"

"She is the best woman that ever breathed," cried Noel, stoutly, "and she's as pure as an angel. Never once, I swear, has a single word passed between us that her husband might not have heard, except so far as his own brutal behavior might have made it unpleasant to his ears, like to-night. I was in awful trouble when I met her, and she has been like a sister to me all through. If it had not been for her, I think sometimes I should have been tempted to blow my brains out. Look here, major, I will tell you about it; but I trust to your honor to keep secret, unless you think, for Mrs. Franklin's sake, the colonel ought to know it. I am married." And Noel blushed like a girl. "I adore my wife,—there is not another woman in the world I would look at in that sort of way,—and I am separated from her, not through any fault of mine. It has nearly driven me mad. Mrs. Franklin knows all about it, and that is why I have been with her so much, because, like the dear, kind soul she is, she was sorry for me, and would always let me talk to her about my miserable affairs."

The major gave a sigh of relief. It would have been impossible for the most sceptical mind to doubt the truth of Noel's statement, so simply and unaffectedly did he make it.

"It only shows," said the major, "how apt people are to

jump to wrong conclusions. But the deuce will be to make the colonel believe it. And I don't see how you are to get over the fact of having been found kissing her hand and calling him a brute. Even if he makes it up with her, I don't see how you can stop in the regiment after what happened to-night."

Noel groaned in spirit. What dreadful Nemesis pursued him and made him bring trouble on every woman he cared for? He had thought at first, in the innocence of his heart, that a few words of explanation on his part would suffice to put everything straight; but he found, to his cost, that you may not, even with the most innocent intentions, call another man's wife darling, and himself a brute, nor kiss her hands and hold them in yours, though you feel to her as a brother and though your heart is as pure towards her as the driven snow.

The poor major got almost thin in his efforts to mediate. The colonel raged like a wild bull, and would talk of nothing but divorce. If Noel had a wife, so much the greater blackguard was he to behave in the way he had done. Mrs. Franklin went away to stay with friends whilst the kind-hearted major and his equally kind-hearted wife did their best to smooth matters down for her with her husband and in the regiment. For of course the affair got noised abroad; and that was how the news travelled home to Charlie Fawcett.

It was finally arranged that Noel should have leave of absence until he could exchange into another regiment. At this juncture a very unexpected piece of good fortune jumped into the scale which the blind goddess seemed to be holding so unequally. Noel, who had been at his wits' end about matters of finance, received the intelligence that the aunt who had nursed him through his illness had added to her benefactions by dying suddenly and leaving him some six hundred a year.

Straightway he resolved to go to England. He knew that Alwyne Temple was married, and his heart burned with the hope that perhaps, now that his rival was removed, Dulcie might look less coldly upon him. And as he looked at himself in the glass (heaven knows that vanity was the last foible of which he was guilty) and saw his bronzed face with the glow of restored health upon it, and

his stalwart, vigorous figure, he thought that he might perhaps have a better chance than the poor, haggard invalid who had evidently inspired such unpleasing emotions in Dulcie's breast.

But whatever he might feel of hope or agreeable anticipation was dashed by the thought that he had, however innocently, brought misfortune on the woman who had been so good to him, and whom he would so fain have protected and defended. He was not even allowed to see her before leaving India, the major and his wife uniting to assure him that nothing could be so fatal to Mrs. Franklin's interests as an interview. He wrote her a letter such as the fulness of his heart dictated, and confided it to the major.

And it was like a gleam of sunshine through black darkness when at Malta he got a telegram from that trusty friend :

*"All will yet be well. Am writing you to London."*

For Noel's heart was too good to have allowed him to be happy whilst a woman was suffering for his sake, even though he had been going straight to Dulcie's arms. And, as we know, he was far enough yet from that Paradise.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

NOEL knew that he was going to meet Dulcie, and his heart beat to suffocation at the thought. The previous afternoon he had met Charlie Fawcett in Pall Mall, and they had dined together at a club. Charlie was not long in letting Noel know the rumors that had reached him, and Noel at once gave his friend the correct version of the affair. Charlie was greatly relieved. If there was not going to be a divorce, if Noel had not done anything to scandalize morality and propriety, there was no reason why he should not be invited to the Grange ; and, as Byng had that very day thrown him over, he invited Noel in his stead.

"We are going to have a festive week at our place," he said. "Three balls and a dinner. The Pratt girls are



coming, and Dulcie Vernon is with us. You remember Dulcie? a pretty little girl. By the way, I think you rather spooned her last winter, didn't you?"

There was no concealing the vivid crimson that covered Noel's face at these words. Charlie saw it, and good-naturedly pretended to be occupied with something of absorbing interest in the street.

Not for one moment did Noel hesitate about his answer. He did not stop to reflect how Dulcie would feel at seeing him, or to think of the embarrassment of the situation: he thought of nothing but that he was burning to see her, to know if the future held any hope for him.

"I should like it of all things," he answered. "Are you sure that I shall not be putting Mrs. Fawcett out? Has she room for me?"

"Lots of room, and only too delighted," replied Charlie, cordially. "I will wire to her in the morning, and we will go down by the three-thirty. I will give you up my share of Dulcie, if you like. My people are rather keen about making up a match between us; but, though I don't know a nicer girl, matrimony is not my game at present. She'll have a nice little fortune. It would come in handy for you, old chap."

He was not aware that he was hurting his friend's feelings by this remark.

"I am not quite such a pauper as I was," Noel replied. And he told Charlie of the modest fortune to which he had succeeded, and Charlie congratulated him with immense cordiality. He had always been fond of Noel, and was delighted at his good fortune.

"Not that you could keep a girl like Dulcie Vernon on seven hundred a year, or anything like it," he remarked; and Noel thought to himself on how very much smaller a sum he had once had the temerity to think of keeping her. The idea seemed to him now little short of madness.

What would she do? How would she receive him? All night long he lay awake, thinking, wondering,—sometimes full of dread, sometimes venturing to hope a little. She had loved him once; why not again?

On the journey down, he was so nervous and ill at ease that Charlie could not help remarking it, and wondered whether he was still feeling the effects of his accident.

"How is your head now?" he asked, presently. "Has it got all right?"

"Yes," Noel answered. "I think I have got over it at last. Every now and then I get a splitting headache if I am over-tired or over-excited, but that is all."

"Beastly thing a headache!" remarked Charlie.

"Yes," Noel assented. "I never knew what it meant before."

After this he settled down, surmising that Charlie had observed his uneasiness.

When they arrived at the manor-house every one had gone to dress for dinner, and, much as Noel longed to see Dulcie, it was almost a relief, in the state of tension of his nerves, to have the meeting delayed.

As he descended to the drawing-room, the gong was in the act of sounding. His head swam as he approached Mrs. Fawcett, looking neither to the right nor the left. She greeted him warmly, and Mary came up and shook hands and said how glad they were to see him back from India. She glanced at the reprobate, as she considered him, with considerable interest, and thought him wonderfully improved in looks.

The procession to the dining-room had commenced, and Mrs. Fawcett said, hurriedly,—

"Will you take Miss Vernon? You are old friends, I think. I need not re-introduce you."

Then Noel followed the eyes of his hostess, and saw Dulcie sitting at a little distance, dressed all in white and looking like a beautiful fairy. For a moment his head reeled, his heart threatened to choke him, and then he was standing before her, holding out his arm. It would be difficult to say which of the two trembled the more. Fortunately, no one remarked their confusion. Neither spoke a word until they had taken their places, and then, as a woman often has the most presence of mind in a social emergency, Dulcie, without looking at him, asked if he had not had a cold journey. So presently Noel found himself talking platitudes in the most approved fashion, whilst he made pretence of eating his dinner; and Dulcie made no pretence, but declined everything that was offered her after the soup. For when the heart is beating with excitement the digestive organs retire from the con-

test and decline to perform their appointed office. It was a singular situation in which Noel found himself. He was sitting beside his own wife, talking to her as if she were a stranger, whilst his heart was beating, his pulses throbbing wildly, and he was dying to catch her to his heart and to pour forth the pent-up stream of love and endearing words into the little ear so close to his lips.

As for Dulcie, she was in a state of mental bewilderment, and could not by any means have told what her real sentiments were. She was surprised to find that she did not regard Noel with the repugnance and aversion which she had felt for him at their last meeting. He was not the haggard, miserable-looking creature who then craved her pity, but a handsome, to all appearance self-possessed, and resolute-looking man. She suddenly remembered the enormity of his recent crime, and, sad to record, felt an increased respect for him, mingled with a feeling of resentment and an acute recollection that he had wronged her shamefully. Primed with this reflection, she dropped the shy and timid manner she had at first assumed, and put on a disdainful and affronted air.

Noel had only one object in life. It was to make her care for him, and to prevail upon her to accept accomplished facts, and take him not only nominally but actually for better for worse. She was his wife, it was true; but unless she consented to accept the situation he felt she was as far removed from him as though the ceremony had never been performed. Instinct warned him that he must of all things beware of frightening her; but he could not in the least make up his mind whether a bold or a humble bearing would have the better chance of success. He had no idea that she was aware of the episode in India, and was furthest from supposing, having a clear conscience in the matter, that she was looking upon him with furtive interest as a monster of iniquity and depravity.

There was to be an impromptu dance at the Grange after dinner, and Noel had been apprised of this. He was wondering whether his wife would dance with him, and looking forward with inexpressible longing yet trepidation to putting his arm round her slender waist.

For, though he had wooed her, persuaded her to elope with him, and had now been her husband for fifteen



months, he had never yet embraced her, nor so much as kissed her hand. It was being in the shoes of Tantalus with a vengeance.

His very shyness gave something of coldness to his outward demeanor, which was in strong contrast to his real feelings; and this was so far fortunate. Although Dulcie pretended to herself to resent his taking matters with a high hand, she secretly respected him the more for it.

After dinner Mary came up and whispered to her,—

“Is he not improved? He really has grown quite handsome. I thought you seemed as if you were inclined to snub him at dinner. It is rather unkind of you, as I dare say, poor fellow, he is in trouble.”

“It is trouble of his own making,” replied Dulcie, with unusual severity. “And I do not think men ought to be encouraged who behave in that sort of way.”

“Why, Dulcie! fancy your turning so severely moral! Besides, we have not heard the rights of the story yet. It cannot be so bad as we thought, or Charlie would not have dared to ask him, knowing how particular mother is.”

“I do not think he ought to have been asked,” returned Dulcie. “It makes it very awkward, because one does not like not to be civil to him, and yet one cannot help being disgusted at his behavior.”

Dulcie had her reasons for saying this. She wished to account in a plausible way for the coldness with which she intended to treat Noel.

“I will get it out of Charlie to-night, or, at all events, to-morrow,” said Mary. “In the mean time, if you don’t want him, you may turn him over to me; for I fancy him immensely, I can tell you, and am not at all inclined to be down on him. If he has done anything wrong, I have no doubt it was all that horrid woman’s fault. Years older than him, too! So disgusting! She ought to be ashamed of herself.”

Mary’s words were not without their effect on Dulcie. She thought better of Noel since he had inspired admiration in the breast of her friend.

Noel was very taciturn after the ladies left the room, and Charlie rallied him on his silence and subdued demeanor.

“I rather feel my head,” replied Noel; and it was not

altogether an excuse, for excitement was wont, as he had said, to bring on a return of his old pain, and, quiet as was his manner outwardly, his breast was burning with mingled emotions. He was trying very hard to make up his mind how he had best behave to his wife. It would not be fair upon her, he thought, to take advantage of people being in ignorance of their relations to each other to force unwilling attentions upon her. No, he would endeavor to behave to her as an ordinary acquaintance might, and watch carefully for any indication of her feelings towards him.

There had not been, he was certain, the expression of repugnance and aversion in her eyes that had cut him to the heart in the summer: the little disdainful air she had assumed during the latter part of the dinner had carried more of coquetry than repulsion in it. He was dying to ask her to dance, but controlled his desire and approached Mary Fawcett with a request for the first dance. She accorded it with every sign of pleasure, and Dulcie, watching them, was unreasonable enough to feel irritated against both. Now, Dulcie had never, in the days of her freedom, been inclined to flirt. She had always a pretty, pleasing manner to every man, but was not in the habit of distinguishing those she liked by making "lightnings of her eyes," or gestures of coquetry, such as even very innocent young girls will use as arrows in their warfare with the other sex. But to-night she departed from all her traditions and customs, and began to smile on Charlie Fawcett in a manner which not only gave him a pleasurable sensation, but delighted his mother and planted a dagger in poor Noel's breast. Until now he had always felt like a brother to Charlie, but gradually, as the evening wore on, the brotherly feeling grew to have something of a Cainish tendency.

Dulcie saw that she was making him miserable, and felt secretly delighted. She said to herself, besides, that she was only inflicting a righteous punishment on him for his infidelity towards her. She made haste to give away every dance, bestowing three on Charlie, and when Noel approached her she threw him an indifferent smile and regretted that she was engaged. His under lip trembled visibly; he looked imploringly at her.

"Will you not give me *one*?" he said; but she answered, lightly,—

"I am very sorry, but I have not one disengaged. In fact, I have promised more dances than there are likely to be."

So Noel watched her from a dark corner, and saw men freely putting their arms round her pretty waist, their faces bending down to hers, her heart beating close to theirs, and he ground his teeth and thought of his own rights of which he dared not claim the smallest part, and, nearly mad with passion and misery, said to himself that waltzing was a most disgusting and immoral practice, which ought not to be tolerated in decent society.

The evening came to an end, and brought him no opportunity of exchanging a word with Dulcie. He had no heart to join the men in the smoking-room: so, pleading the pain in his head, he went to his own room, where he paced up and down like a caged lion. He could not stand much more of this sort of thing, he swore, and he turned over a dozen different plans in his head.

She was his wife, he kept telling himself: if he chose, he could enforce his rights, and the law would be on his side. He would insist on an interview with her, and would tell her firmly that he could not stand this any longer; that since, of her own free will and choice, she had married him, she must abide by the consequences. It was some comfort to him to reflect that her mother acknowledged the binding nature of the tie and had advised him to act with firmness.

Next day, however, no opportunity presented itself of his exchanging a word with her. She evaded him without any apparent design, but so successfully as to baffle his resolve. That night the ball at the Grange was to take place, and he asked her, as he handed her a cup of tea in the afternoon, if she would give him the first waltz.

She had promised the first to Mr. Fawcett, she replied, with an innocent smile that transfixed him like an arrow, but she would be happy to give him any other except the third, which she had also promised Mr. Fawcett. As she said, "I shall be happy," her indifferent glance seemed to indicate that it would be a great bore, but she



supposed she must submit to it. The tone was not lost on Noel, and it pained him keenly.

"Dulcie," observed Mary Fawcett, going into her friend's room before dinner, "you need not keep up that disdainful manner to Noel Trevor. I have asked Charlie about the Indian affair, and he says it is all right, and there is not going to be a divorce, after all."

"Really!" uttered Dulcie, with apparent indifference.

Mary did not continue the recital, seeing that Dulcie showed no interest in it; and Dulcie remained under the impression that, although the affair had been hushed up, Noel was none the less guilty.

Poor Noel could eat no dinner again this evening, for not only was his heart throbbing at the thought of the dance which Dulcie had so indifferently accorded him, but he had the misery of sitting opposite her and Charlie and being witness of a decided flirtation between them.

Dulcie had never distinguished Charlie in this manner before, and it was extremely agreeable to the young fellow. He had declared that matrimony was not in his line, but he had never before had encouragement from such a pretty girl, and his vanity was flattered. For Dulcie was always an object of admiration to men, and they never failed to be attracted by her fair and very feminine style of beauty and by her gracious and amiable manners.

If Charlie had guessed how he was hurting his friend's feelings, he would certainly have abstained from evincing so plainly the delight he felt at Dulcie's preference; but he was as innocent as a baby in the matter, and, if he observed that Noel looked morose and miserable, attributed it to his head, or to regretful thoughts of the fair one left behind in India.

The hour approached to which Noel had been looking so keenly forward, but before it arrived he was filled with anger and misery by the sight of Dulcie leaning on his friend in the waltz with an *abandon* that stirred every fibre of passion in his jealous heart and made him for the time almost inclined to hate them both. He had a wild thought of taking Charlie aside and telling him the truth: if things went much further, he felt that he must.

The second waltz came, and he walked up to Dulcie to claim it. She received him with great nonchalance, and

when he put the arm that all his self-command could not restrain from trembling round her, she held herself stiff and upright in the most aggressively virtuous manner. The momentary fire which had blazed up in Noel's breast died away to coldness; he felt a gnawing sense of disappointment and mortification. He had intended to lead her into the conservatory as soon as the dance was over and to insist on an explanation, but even ere the concluding bars were played she declared that she had torn her dress and must go to have it repaired, and, withdrawing her hand from his arm, she left him before he had time even to utter a remonstrance.

When she reappeared, he begged her urgently for another dance, but she smilingly declared herself engaged for the remainder of the evening, and turned away as though there was nothing more to be said in the matter. As indeed there was not.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE following evening the county ball took place, and, although Dulcie danced twice with Noel, she gave him no opportunity of saying to her what was burning in his heart. It was a sheer impossibility to utter in a ball-room, where five hundred other people were present, "You are my wife, and I will no longer live without you." A certain amount of privacy was absolutely indispensable to a communication of such a nature. Entreaty, even a little gentle force, might perhaps be needed to eke out persuasion, and the five hundred and odd other persons formed as stout a wall as that through which Pyramus addressed Thisbe. Noel would have asked her to give him an interview in the morning-room, conservatory, garden,—anywhere,—had not the conviction impressed itself upon him that she would not only refuse it, but take care to avoid any accident which might throw her into his company alone. The time was drawing on: this was Wednesday; on Saturday his visit would come to an end. He longed for some one to help him.

Mary Fawcett was a nice, amiable girl, who seemed well disposed towards him: he was half inclined to beg her help to obtain him an interview with Dulcie; but what pretext could he make for seeking one without arousing her suspicions? And, embittered as he was against Dulcie by her cruelty and her flirtation with Charlie, he was still anxious to avoid causing her embarrassment. A bolder policy would, without doubt, have been wiser in dealing with so weak a character as Dulcie's: she put down his timorousness to a guilty conscience, and was secretly a little provoked that he allowed himself to be rebuffed so easily.

She had by this time recovered from her hopeless love of Alwyne, and Noel no longer inspired her with any sense of repugnance. Her behavior was more the outcome of that tyrannous love of showing power which the weak love to exert when a victim is thrown in their way; she bullied him because he was afraid of her: if he had been bold and resolute at first, she would probably have succumbed. But his weakness had the effect of making her strong. On Thursday the flirtation between her and Charlie grew to such magnitude that Noel was almost beside himself, and resolved to take Mary partly into his confidence. He had no difficulty in finding an opportunity of being alone with her.

"I want you to do me a great favor," he said, in imploring tones; and a girl is never averse to a request of this sort from a man whom she regards with favorable eyes. But when he made it known to her that his urgent request regarded a private interview with Dulcie, a pang of disappointment shot through her breast. She was fond of Dulcie, but it was rather hard that all the men should be taken up with her, to the exclusion of the other girls, herself among them. She had a suspicion, too, that she might be standing in her brother's light by furthering Noel's wish, for she had not forgotten that Dulcie had been very much attracted to him the previous winter, although she was taking such a severely moral tone about him now. Still, this might be only a sign of pique.

She hesitated; but Noel entreated her with so much eloquence that she gave way at last, and promised to do what she could. In her own mind she felt sure that he



wanted to explain away the affair with the colonel's wife in India.

She arranged to take Dulcie next day at noon to a small room opening out of the entrance-hall, under pretence of showing her something. The room was rarely used, and they would be more secure against intrusion there than in any other part of the house. Noel spent the night in framing speeches likely to overcome Dulcie's obduracy; sometimes they were tender, sometimes stern; and even when the morning dawned he had not made up his mind what line it would be best to take.

The next morning he lingered about until the appointed time, and about ten minutes after noon, as he was loitering in the hall, he heard the voices of the two young ladies, and, sheltering himself behind the large hat-stand where cloaks and wraps offered ample concealment, he presently saw them enter the room indicated by Mary. A moment later, he turned the handle of the door gently and went in. Mary gave him a cordial greeting, and the pair remained chatting for a few minutes, whilst Dulcie looked out of the window and preserved a strict neutrality.

Suddenly Mary started up.

"Mother is calling me," she cried, and ran to the door. Dulcie, hearing this exclamation, turned and prepared to follow her friend, but Noel closed the door quietly and stood with his back to it.

Dulcie, seeing herself caught in a trap, blushed, and a sparkle of anger lighted up her blue eyes.

Noel, though his pulses were hurrying violently, kept up a semblance of calmness.

"It is time," he said, "that we had some explanation."

"Let me pass, if you please," exclaimed Dulcie, with an unusual display of *hauteur*.

"No," replied Noel, firmly; "not until I have said my say. You seem to forget," and here he, too, colored, "that I am your husband, and that I cannot go on for an indefinite time being treated by you as though I had no claim on you."

Dulcie was a little frightened, but she kept up her disdainful mien.

"I thought all that was settled last summer, and that you were not going to annoy me any more," she said.

Great heaven! to be talked to in this way, as if he were nothing more than a troublesome suitor!

"You must allow me to remind you of the facts of the case," remarked Noel, proudly, stung to the quick by her words. "I met you here fifteen months ago, and loved you. I think you loved me too. If not, you would hardly have consented to marry me as you did."

"I was young and inexperienced," retorted Dulcie, "and you entrapped me into marriage."

"The arts I used were very simple ones," returned Noel, bitterly. "I loved you, and told you so. I asked you to marry me, and you consented."

"How did I know that you were going to tell all sorts of falsehoods to the registrar," cried Dulcie, "and to bring the most dreadful disgrace upon me?"

"Disgrace!" echoed Noel. "I do not know that there is any disgrace in being the wife of an honest man who loves you, even though he may be as poor as I was. You knew that I should be compelled to make a mis-statement about your age, because I told you so, and asked you to try to make yourself look older. I concealed nothing from you: we discussed everything fully beforehand."

"But you knew that I was ignorant and inexperienced," answered Dulcie. "You have made my life one long misery. Here I am tied down for life, living in a state of deception, afraid every hour of being discovered, and unable to receive the attentions of any other man, however much I may wish to."

Her words were like knives stabbing him to the heart. He turned from hot to cold. Her cruelty was more than he could bear.

"Do you admit," he said, after a moment's pause, unable to look at her, so bitter did he feel,—“do you admit that when you married me you loved me?"

"I suppose I thought I did," she answered, cruelly. "I was too young to know my own mind."

"And if," continued Noel, not noticing the last part of her sentence, "you loved me then, what have I done since to forfeit your love? Was it my fault that the accident happened which brought me to the verge of death?"

"It was a judgment upon us for deceiving mamma," said Dulcie.

Noel made an impatient gesture.

"It is childish to talk like that!" he said, almost angrily. "You loved me, and married me. You are my wife, and I will not have my life ruined by your caprice. I was weak enough last summer to allow myself to be kicked out like a cur, but I will not again go through such a miserable time as that I spent in India, because I cared too much for you to force myself upon you."

He had given Dulcie her cue, and she was not slow to take advantage of it.

"I should think," she said, scornfully, "you must have been very miserable. You were, at all events, not very long in consoling yourself."

"What do you mean?" cried Noel, amazed. He had no idea that Dulcie was aware of the episode in India.

"You know very well what I mean," she answered, with a toss of her head. "You pretended to be so dreadfully unhappy about me, and not a month after you were behaving in the most shameful manner with that horrid woman."

Noel was staggered by her words, and Dulcie took his momentary hesitation for a sign of guilt.

"I do not know what you have heard," he said, presently, "but I am in a position to explain everything and to put an end to any possible misunderstanding."

A momentary flash of happiness thrilled through his heart at the idea that perhaps she was jealous of him.

"It will not be very easy to explain, I imagine," she returned, coldly. "Do not think to deceive me. I know everything. You went on in such a disgraceful way with your colonel's wife that he threatened to get a divorce from her; and I am sure I don't know why he did not."

"But I do," answered Noel, warmly. "Because there was not a shadow of foundation for his suspicions, and because Mrs. Franklin is the best and purest little woman in the world."

"Really!" with increased disdain. "I thought every one knew what *she* is!"

"Any one who breathes a word against her is a liar!" cried Noel.

"Thank you," retorted Dulcie, with flaming cheeks.

"I am not speaking of you," he answered, "because you



cannot possibly know anything about her, and only repeat what has been told you by some scandalous person. It was you, indirectly, who were the cause of all the misunderstanding. When I was so wretched, I used to talk to her about you, and she listened with the patience of an angel and gave me all the sympathy I could have claimed from a sister."

"Indeed!" cried Dulcie, far from being pacified by his words. "I can imagine nothing that I should dislike so much as being discussed by a creature like that!"

"I will not allow even you to speak of her in that way!" cried Noel, angrily. "You must accept my word for what she is, and I will not permit any one in my presence to asperse the kindest and best little woman in the world."

"You had better go back to the kindest and best little woman in the world!" retorted Dulcie, her temper fully aroused by his championship of the detested wife of his colonel.

"My conscience is perfectly clear," said Noel, more quietly. "Since I met you, I have never loved, never had a thought for, any woman but you. And I scarcely think reproaches come very well from you to me, after your confession that you loved Mr. Temple."

"You will be good enough," said Dulcie, in tones tremulous from shame and mortification, "to leave Mr. Temple's name out of the question. He is married, and is nothing to me."

"God knows," replied Noel, more gently, "I wish nothing better than to forget that he ever existed. Dulcie," going a step nearer to her, "let us forget all the miserable time that is past, and begin the future afresh. I dare say I was very foolish and very wrong, but God is my witness I only sinned from love of you, and surely I have been punished. Darling, I don't think you can be so unjust as to hate me without a cause, and, since our lives are bound together, why should we not be happy? I love you with all my soul. My own wife, do not be cruel to me!"

He stretched out his arms to clasp her, but, with a frightened look, she eluded him.

"No, no!" she cried. "Things are much better as they are. I do not want to be your wife."

A sudden overmastering passion of anger and desire swept across Noel. Why should he submit any longer to be played the fool with by this girl?—why should he stand trembling before her, humbly beseeching as a favor what was his of right? Swayed by a violent impulse, he caught her suddenly in his arms, and, holding her by main force, held her face upturned to his, and kissed her passionately again and again. She uttered a shriek, and struggled to free herself from his embrace. At this moment, unseen by either of them in their violent emotion, a form passed the window, paused a moment, then made a dash for the house. A moment later Charlie Fawcett rushed into the room, caught hold of Noel, and dashed him backwards against the wall.

"You blackguard!" he gasped, breathless with rage and exertion; "how dare you insult a lady in this house!"

And the two men stood glaring at each other, whilst Dulcie threw herself on a couch, weeping hysterically.

"You will be good enough to leave this at once," proceeded Charlie, quite beside himself with passion, and taking up the rôle of champion of the outraged fair. "This sort of thing may be all very well in India, but it won't do here, I can tell you! You shall answer to me for this."

"Oh!" said Noel, with surprising calmness, "it is you I have to thank for spreading lying reports about me, is it?"

"At all events, there will be no lies when I tell how you have insulted a defenceless girl to-day," cried Charlie.

His words conjured up a terrible picture of shame and exposure before Dulcie's mind. If this dreadful affair were known, everything would doubtless come out. Noel, to justify himself, would probably proclaim the truth, and she would die of shame. She checked her sobs, and stood up, looking very white, but making a great effort to command her voice.

"Mr. Fawcett," she said, "I beg of you not to let this go any further. For my sake, you must please not say a word of what has happened to any one. Promise me, oh! promise me not to take any more notice of it."

Charlie was disagreeably surprised. He had just distinguished himself in this heroic manner, had come to

bring timely aid to a distressed damsel, and, instead of being grateful to him, she was insisting that nothing should be said on the subject.

"My dear Miss Vernon," he replied, "you cannot suppose that I will allow a man to behave in such a disgraceful way to a guest under my mother's roof. I am sorry Trevor should so far have forgotten himself; but I cannot permit him to remain here after what has happened."

"If Mr. Trevor leaves the house," said Dulcie, with unexpected firmness, "I shall leave it too. And you could not do anything that would distress or annoy me half so much as by giving the least hint of what has happened. If you do, you will not be my friend," and, with some vehemence, "I will never forgive you."

A cloud gathered on Charlie's brow. There was no understanding women. He had never thought very much of the sex, and now he thought still less. She had shrieked and struggled in Noel's embrace, and all the time, he supposed, she liked it, and was quite annoyed with him for having come in and stopped it. Well, that put an end, once and for all, to any thought he might have entertained of marrying her.

He drew himself up, and said, stiffly,—

"I see I have made a mistake. I apologize for having come in at an awkward moment. It will be a lesson to me to be more discreet in future."

And he moved towards the door.

"Oh," cried Dulcie, exceedingly distressed by his manner, "pray do not take it in that way! You do not understand. Mr. Trevor has behaved in a most unpardonable manner; but do you not see that if he were to go away suddenly there would have to be explanations?"

"It is perfectly simple," said Noel. "I can say that I have had a telegram and must go to London this afternoon.—If," coldly to Charlie, "you will be good enough to order the dog-cart, I will get my things packed at once."

"No, no!" cried Dulcie, with unusual firmness; "you must *not* go. If you do, I will never see you again. Remember,"—looking from one to the other of them,— "if either of you let what has happened come out, you will be doing me the greatest injury, and I shall leave the house at once."



With that, she slipped past them out of the room, leaving both in a most awkward and uncomfortable situation.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

FOR a moment, neither Charlie nor Noel moved or spoke. Noel was the first to break the silence. He felt disconcerted and ashamed of himself for having given way to his passion. No man, husband or not, had, in his opinion, any right to use force to a woman. It was cowardly. Unpleasant as it was to him to have to make an explanation, especially after Charlie's rough handling of him, he felt bound to say something.

"I am sorry," he began, "for what has happened."

Charlie shrugged his shoulders.

"I am devilish sorry that I interfered," he returned. "It is evident the girl liked it, although she screamed and struggled. I shall know better another time."

But this view of the matter, and the slighting tone in which Charlie spoke, displeased Noel amazingly.

"You do not understand," he exclaimed. "It was I who was in the wrong, utterly in the wrong; and it is very good of Miss Vernon not to take the affair more seriously."

"Pooh!" said Charlie, lightly. "I believe women like to be treated in that sort of way, and only make a fuss to save their reputation for virtue. They are all much of a muchness. I never had any very great belief in them, though I must say I thought Dulcie Vernon was a different sort."

His words were gall and wormwood to his hearer. Any impeachment of Dulcie was much more painful to him than the most severe condemnation of himself.

"You don't understand," he said again, warmly. "I was entirely to blame. But there are reasons, only I cannot tell them to you just at present, why my conduct was not so altogether unpardonable as it seems."

"Not at all," returned Charlie, provokingly. "I don't blame any man for kissing a pretty woman. I only wish

to heaven I had not happened to come along at that moment! In future, whatever I may see and hear, a woman may shriek her life out before I stir a finger in her defence. I am sorry, old chap, I laid hands on you; she wasn't worth it: none of them are. Come, shake hands and forget what I said."

Noel felt it was no use arguing about the matter, since he could not tell the truth. So he shook hands, and said,—

"You swear not to breathe a word of this?"

"Oh, yes, I swear," returned Charlie, in a nonchalant manner. "Hang the women! I wish they were all at the bottom of the Red Sea."

Mary was very curious to know what Noel had had to say to Dulcie, and plied her with questions when they were alone together after luncheon. But Dulcie declared that their conversation had been of the most commonplace nature, and that there was nothing to tell.

"But did he propose to you?" asked Mary. "I believe he did."

"Oh, dear, no! Certainly not. How absurd you are!" returned Dulcie.

"I don't care. I know there is something between you," exclaimed Mary. "And it is very ill-natured of you not to tell me, as I managed the interview for him."

"Very good of you, I am sure!" retorted Dulcie. "I think you might have consulted me first as to whether I should like it. As you seem to be so much in Mr. Trevor's confidence, you had better get him to tell you what happened."

Charlie was not an adept at dissimulation. He treated Dulcie with marked coldness, and pointedly avoided her. His mother and sister imagined that he had proposed to and been refused by her, and Dulcie was extremely uncomfortable at his behavior, fearing that it would give rise to suspicion and that something of the truth might leak out. Contrary to his habit, for he was a good-natured young fellow, he talked in a sarcastic and ironical manner, and was extremely hard on the opposite sex when opportunity offered. He could not feel the hearty friendship for Noel he had hitherto done, and, altogether, he looked forward to the end of the week when the party would break up. He should be off to London, not caring

to be thrown any more with Dulcie in the intimacy of their quiet home life.

Dulcie, for her part, was much more gentle in her demeanor to Noel than she had been before that little episode. Perhaps, now that he had shown a more masterful spirit than she had given him credit for, her respect for him was increased; perhaps she felt that her present life was unsatisfactory, and that, after all, this state of affairs could not be prolonged indefinitely.

Noel, ashamed of his violence, did not follow up his temporary advantage at once, but, fearing to displease her and to add to her embarrassment, behaved with simple courtesy towards her, and did not seek another interview.

The hunt ball was to take place on the Friday evening, and on Saturday his visit was to come to an end. Dulcie had consented to give him two waltzes with apparent willingness, and when she danced with him she no longer held herself in the stiff and freezing manner that she had done at the Grange. Poor Noel was so dreadfully in love with her that all his timidity returned; he had a mortal dread of frightening or angering her; but, as he met her eyes when the dance was concluding, and saw, or fancied he saw, in them a look that was not exactly one of aversion, his heart gave a sudden throb, and he felt that he could not and would not leave her without some hope to live on in the future. There were two or three couches placed in a corridor where the light was not very strong,—placed there, evidently, for the convenience of persons wishing to discuss matters of a more private nature than the ball-room gave opportunity for,—and at the end of the last waltz Noel conducted Dulcie to one of these, and she, although aware of his intention, did not offer any resistance.

Perhaps it would have been wiser if Noel had refrained from alluding to that little scene of the previous day; but lovers are seldom wise, and Noel's conscience had so pricked him for his offence that he felt in honor bound to apologize for his violence.

"I hope," he said, with great eagerness, the moment that he had seated himself beside her and had ascertained that they were out of earshot,—*"I hope you have for-*



given me for what I did yesterday. I have felt the most awful brute ever since!"

Dulcie blushed and averted her face: she would much rather not have been reminded of his indiscretion.

"If you knew," he went on, "how awfully tantalizing it is to be near you, and to—to remember——"

Here he paused, feeling the delicacy of the situation, and not daring to go on, for fear of offending or alarming her. She averted her face still more, to conceal the greater spread and deepening of her color.

"I do not think," he went on, stealing a hand towards hers, "that you hate me so very much; it is not such a dreadful thought, is it, that your life is bound up with mine?"

His voice was very low, but there was an eager ring of passion in it.

"You say," he proceeded, "that your life is full of anxiety and worry now: do you think it would be more so if I were always beside you to shield you from trouble and annoyance? Your life with your mother must be wretched: why will you not come to me, when I am so devoted to you? From my soul, I believe I could make you happy."

Dulcie's hand was in his, and she allowed it to remain there after one ineffectual attempt to regain possession of it.

"I feel now," Noel continued, as she made no answer to him, "that my marrying you in the penniless condition which I then was in, was little short of madness; but now—I do not know if you have heard it—I am very much better off. Since my aunt's death, I have nearly eight hundred a year. It is not what you have been used to, I know; but I want so little myself,—I have had to do without all my life,—and everything shall be spent on you."

Dulcie had not heard of his inheritance, and the news was a relief. Now that no romance attached to her thoughts of Noel, she was no longer enamoured of poverty. She knew, too, that she would come into money when she was twenty-one or married, and it occurred to her that the greatest blessing in life would be to get away from her mother's control and to be her own mistress.

Whilst Noel, therefore, was pleading his love, practical

considerations were making common cause with him in her mind. If he were only proposing to her, she would have been very much inclined to accept him. The thought that she was already his wife, and that he could claim her when he pleased, embarrassed and disconcerted her. Although she remained without speaking, the fact of her not refusing to listen to him gave Noel courage.

"I have been so patient," he pleaded, clasping her hand closer, and drawing nearer to her, until his breath was almost on her cheek, "will you not let that move you? Last year, when you told me that you did not love me, when you threw yourself on my mercy, did I not go away and leave you? God knows that, if I could have put an end to my life then to make you happier, I would have done so. But now it is different, is it not—darling?" He uttered the endearing word almost timidly. "Say, at least, that you do not hate me."

"No," said Dulcie, speaking at last, though in a cooler tone than was pleasing to her listener, "I do not hate you; but it is all so awkward, so perplexing. I do not see my way out of it."

"How is it awkward?" urged Noel. "Everything is simple enough. Why should you not join me in London next week? Your mother is out of the country. We need not consult her. You know she is quite willing to recognize the marriage. We can go away together, and it can be announced in the papers, and no date need be mentioned."

As the whole delightful programme spread itself out before his eyes, Noel grew keen and excited, and approached still nearer to his beloved.

But she shrank from him with a terrified gesture, and cried, "No, no, no!" with immense emphasis.

Noel's face clouded over, and a look of discouragement passed over it. Was he never going to overcome her hesitation? Was he to go on drifting month after month in this miserable uncertainty?

"God knows," he said, gloomily, "what all this is to end in! Any day I may be gazetted to my new regiment, and then I may have to leave you again and be no nearer to having things settled than I was a month ago."

"I will not go to India," exclaimed Dulcie, "nor any-

where out of England. If—if—I think at all about it you must sell out."

"You were ready to go anywhere with me once!" he rejoined, with some bitterness.

"But I am not now," she answered. "I will not hear anything of the sort."

"You expect me to make every sacrifice," he continued, for he was fond of his profession, "and even then you promise nothing. How do I know that, if I were to give up all that I have looked forward to in the way of ambition, you would not throw me over then?"

"Oh," said Dulcie, piqued, "of course, if you cannot trust me——"

"May I trust you?" he cried, a sudden warmth breaking over his heart, and he put his arm round her. "Only tell me"—eagerly, and with a swift return of hope to his face—"that you will be mine really, and I will send in my papers to-morrow."

"There is no hurry," replied Dulcie, whose object was delay, not to precipitate matters.

"But there is hurry!" he cried, hotly. "I must, I will know, here and now, what I have to go upon. What do you propose? What do you wish?"

"Nothing can be done whilst I am here, at all events," returned Dulcie; "and my visit is to last at least another fortnight."

"Why not?" urged Noel. "What is the use of delaying a fortnight?"

"Mamma will not hear of anything except our being married in church," she said.

Noel was furious.

"That is nonsense!" he said, sharply. "We *are* married. All the bishops in England cannot marry us any more. It is simply a farce."

"Then you do not care about my feelings," returned Dulcie. "You do not mind my being talked about, and people saying all sorts of horrid things of me. That is just like a man's selfishness."

Noel was touched, for if there was one epithet he did not deserve, it was that one, selfish.

"It shall be as you wish, then, my darling," he said: "your happiness and your good name are dearer to me



than any other consideration in the world. But, surely, if I agree to this marriage in church" (rather dismally) "there need not be any very great delay!"

"Oh, but there must be!" cried Dulcie, perversely. "I do not want a syllable to be known by the Fawcetts until I have left the Grange. Then you might come and see me at my aunt's, and I can pretend that you proposed to me there. Then I must write to mamma; and she will not be home for another month. Then there is my trousseau to be got. We cannot certainly be married for three months from this time."

Noel jumped to his feet with a sudden access of passion.

"I will not wait three months!" he cried. "I would rather give you up altogether! You treat me as if I were a contemptible fool, who will submit to any humiliation, any caprice. If I choose, I can take you away with me to-night; no living soul can hinder me; and, because I have behaved generously to you all along, my only reward is to be made a fool of. I have done! I give up! Shall I," with extreme coldness, "take you back to Mrs. Fawcett?"

He had struck the right chord at last. Any one who chose to be firm and masterful with Dulcie was certain to conquer.

She gazed up at him with a timid, appealing look, and tears came into her pretty blue eyes.

"Noel," she murmured, "do not be unkind to me!"

It was the first time for fifteen months that she had called him by his name, and it sent a thrill to his heart.

"Come and sit down by me again," she said, motioning him to a seat beside her. "Let us talk it over, and tell me what you wish."

He obeyed her, and, though his heart was melted by her look of distress, he commanded himself sufficiently to preserve a cold and stern demeanor, seeing that this behavior was the most calculated to bring her to submission.

He did not speak, and, after waiting a moment and playing nervously with her fan, she said, looking down,—

"What do you wish me to do?"

Noel answered with great firmness and promptitude.

"I wish you to tell the Fawcetts that I proposed to you

to-night, and that you accepted me. I wish you to write to your mother to-morrow; and I insist"—this was a bold stroke for Noel—"that the ceremony shall be performed in a month from the present time."

"But mamma will not be back," pleaded Dulcie.

"Very well," returned Noel, resolutely: "then we will go to her and be married abroad. You write to her to-morrow, and I will write too."

So Dulcie yielded, and promised to do what he desired.

At that moment the corridor was empty, for the favorite waltz of the day was being played, and every one who was not dancing was standing near the doors of the ball-room to listen to it.

Noel drew his wife gently towards him and pressed his lips to hers. This time she did not struggle or resist. A minute later, Noel, looking radiant, and Dulcie, shy and prettier than ever with a rose-bud blooming in each cheek, swelled the throng that was listening appreciatively to the delicious strains of the waltz.

"Shall we not dance it?" he whispered; and, Dulcie assenting, he put his arm triumphantly round her slender waist and bore her away among the dancers.

At last he felt as though she belonged to him; it was almost the happiest moment of his life.

Nor was Dulcie, on her part, tormented by the displeasing sensations of repugnance and disgust.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

REINE CHANDOS, whom we must retrace our steps some three months to seek, felt great sympathy for her aunt, although she was sorry too for Dulcie. Mrs. Vernon, it could not be denied, had been an admirable mother, and Dulcie had lacked nothing that the most tender care and the deepest interest in her welfare could supply. She was not of an affectionate or demonstrative nature, but until the time when Dulcie had so cruelly surprised and disappointed her she had treated her with uniform kindness

and indulgence, giving her every pleasure and surrounding her with luxury. She had been most generous in gifts, and few girls in *Dulcie's* position were as daintily apparelled or had so many pretty knick-knacks. There was nothing mean about *Mrs. Vernon*, and, although an excellent manager, no one in her household had any cause to complain of any want of liberality on her part. She was extremely considerate to dependants, and only exacting in respect of obedience to her very reasonable orders.

*Reine* was thoroughly aware of her aunt's good qualities, her honorable instincts and love of justice: she found no fault with the somewhat autocratic disposition which did not manifest itself capriciously. She and *Mrs. Vernon* had always been on the best of terms, and *Reine* had every reason to remember gratefully the kindness and support her aunt had given her at a time when she sorely needed it.

In November, when she called in *Grosvenor Street* during a flying visit to London, she was shocked to see how ill and harassed *Mrs. Vernon* looked. She had a very bad cough, and was in a state of depression extremely unusual to her.

"Dear *Reine*," she said, reduced to the unwonted weakness of tears, "I am so wretched that I find life unbearable. If I could only get away abroad! I cannot tell you how I long for the South,—for warmth, brightness, sunshine; but I could not go with *Dulcie*, who seems to jar upon my every nerve, and I really do not feel equal to going alone. I know how full of engagements you always are, but," looking wistfully at her, "if you could manage to go with me and stay, if only for a week or two, I should be so grateful to you."

*Reine* decided in a moment. She had a grateful heart: here was an opportunity of repaying in part the kindness of which she had always entertained a tender recollection.

"Certainly, dear aunt, I will go," she said, brightly. "The change will do you all the good in the world, and I shall have no difficulty in making a little change in my plans."

A week later, the two ladies were in *Cannes*, and *Mrs. Vernon* was a different woman, having left her cares behind, and thoroughly enjoying the congenial companion-



ship of Reine, who was never so charming as when she had an invalid to look after and divert. In a month she was able to leave Mrs. Vernon, who, though she missed her greatly, had now several friends and acquaintances in Cannes and was comparatively independent of a companion.

At the end of January Reine returned to England, and joined Mrs. Herbert, who was wintering this year at Bournemouth, having conceived a momentary distaste for the Continent.

The friends had spent ten days of fine weather delightfully together, agreeing that one's own country was the only place to be thoroughly comfortable in, when, one morning, Mrs. Herbert received a letter which caused her brows to pucker into a frown and the corners of her mouth to droop ominously. It was her habit not to open her letters until breakfast, when she declared they interested her much more than at any other time, and she could, besides, share her news and discuss her correspondence with her companions.

"What is the matter, Mia?" inquired Reine, who happened at this moment to glance towards her friend.

"Something that concerns you; something extremely tiresome and inconvenient. Here, my love, read and decide!" And she handed the letter across the table.

Reine exhibited equal marks of concern as she read:

"MY DEAR MRS. HERBERT,—

"I really do not know how to address you on the subject which at this moment weighs very heavily on my heart. My poor little Lilah is seriously ill and suffering the most acute pain from rheumatic fever. It is piteous to be with her and to witness her agony. For the last two days she has done nothing but moan and cry for Mrs. Chandos. The poor darling has taken it into her head that if she could be mesmerized as last September, the pain would leave her, and she does nothing but implore us to send for Mrs. Chandos, who she is sure would come to her if she knew what torture she was suffering. But, in the first place, I do not know where Mrs. Chandos is; and, in the second, how could I ask such a great thing of a lady to whom we are all but strangers? I know how kind

she is; but we have no right to trespass on her goodness by asking such a favor of her. It is so heart-rending, however, to hear my poor child's cries for her that I can no longer refuse to write and, at all events, endeavor to learn where Mrs. Chandos is. Will you tell me what you advise? I cannot bear to trouble you, but I think you will let my extreme anxiety for my suffering little daughter plead my excuse.

"Very sincerely yours,  
"C. CHESTER."

Mrs. Herbert had frowned because she saw an end to the very agreeable time she was spending in Reine's society. She knew her friend well enough to feel tolerably sure that, however inconvenient, she would scarcely be able to resist such an appeal, or to throw away a chance of playing the part of ministering angel which was so peculiarly grateful to her sympathetic temperament. Reine's face, as she laid the letter down, betrayed the keenest perplexity and trouble. Under ordinary circumstances, she would not have hesitated for a moment; but her memory recalled painfully the sentiments which Mrs. Chester had expressed about her, and she declared to herself that she did not wish to be thrown into contact with Sir John after the declaration which he had made her in the autumn. Still, the thought of the poor little sufferer was bound to triumph, and her heart was giving her the most decided orders as to her duty.

"Well?" said Mrs. Herbert, in a dreary tone, foreshadowing her conviction that she was to lose her beloved companion.

"There is nothing," exclaimed Reine, with energy, "that I could possibly dislike so much as going to stay at the Hall."

"But you will go all the same," remarked Mrs. Herbert, in a forlorn tone. The goodness of her own heart prevented her from throwing any obstacle in the way, although it was such a dreadful sacrifice to give up Reine's delightful company.

"What shall I do, Mia? I believe it is nothing but fancy on the poor child's part: I do not suppose I can do her one atom of good. Yet I cannot bear the thought of

disappointing her if she has a craving for me. It is only a sick fancy; but sometimes those fancies of a disordered mind have an enormous effect on the disease and its cure."

"Of course you must go," returned Mrs. Herbert, with the air of a martyr.

"I cannot bear to leave you, Mia, and there is no place in the world to which I so much dislike the idea of going. Do you think I have forgotten Mrs. Chester's opinion of me?"

"That is nonsense," replied Mrs. Herbert. "And she has changed it long ago. Sir John told me as much."

"Suppose I go for a couple of days!"

"I know what that means," returned Mrs. Herbert, drearily. "Oh, my dear, of course you must go, and I must be left lamenting. I have been so happy the last few days that I quite expected something to happen; and here it is!"

"Mia," observed Reine, after a minute's reflection, "write and say that I am with you; that, if Mrs. Chester really thinks I can be use, I will go for a couple of days, but that in a case of rheumatism I fear my mesmeric powers will be of no avail. Ask her to telegraph, if she is in earnest in desiring my presence, and I will go."

"You had better have your things packed," remarked Mrs. Herbert, dryly. "There can be no doubt as to what the answer will be."

The two friends spent a melancholy day, regretting by anticipation the loss of each other's society. Reine insisted that she would not remain more than three days at the Hall; but Mrs. Herbert shook her head.

"It will be nearer three weeks before I see you again," she said, disconsolately. "I shall telegraph to Jessie to come down to-morrow."

"Wait until you know that I am going," suggested Reine.

"I know it already," replied Mrs. Herbert, dolefully.

The next day, indeed, saw Reine *en route* for the Hall. As much of gratitude as could be compressed into a telegram arrived with all possible speed, and Mrs. Chandos—whose preparations were already made—started at once. It was a long and tedious journey, and, if there was one



thing Reine detested more than another, it was railway-travelling.

At a quarter to seven she arrived at the C—— station, where Sir John was awaiting her with the brougham. As he helped her to alight from the carriage, he could scarcely find words to welcome her. His immense gratitude and his joy at seeing her again choked him. But the look in his eyes, the fervent pressure of his hand, were eloquent enough. Mrs. Chester came to the hall door, and embraced Reine with the tears running down her cheeks.

"How good, how good of you!" she cried, bursting into tears and sobs.

Tired though she was, Reine insisted on going at once to the room of the little sufferer. When she saw the joyous light that broke over the poor, wan face at sight of her, she felt repaid for the trouble, mental and physical, it had cost her to come. Who could have imagined a year ago such a welcome being accorded to Mrs. Chandos at the Hall? Life is, indeed, full of surprises.

Mrs. Herbert had been quite correct in her conviction that some considerable time would elapse before she again saw her friend. Lilah began to get better from the moment that Reine entered the house, and any talk of her leaving sent the poor child into paroxysms of distress.

Reine insisted on spending nearly the whole day at Lilah's bedside. She was the only person who could do anything to her satisfaction. The touch of every one else she declared was rough and hurt her, and she would shrink and cry if any one else attempted to lay a finger on her, even her mother.

Mrs. Chester was divided between gratitude and distress. She could not endure to think of the trouble and irksomeness Reine must suffer by constant attendance on the exacting invalid, and yet she was so intensely thankful to see the great alleviation that Mrs. Chandos brought to Lilah's suffering. Never did balm fall so sweetly upon a man's heart as his mother's praise of Reine did on Jack: he would have liked to say a thousand times a day, if it had not been a womanish trick, unworthy of a man, "Did I not tell you so? You see how right I was!"

Mrs. Chester was indeed forced to confess to herself how utterly different a woman Reine was from what she

had imagined. The two ladies had many opportunities of chatting together, and never did Reine let fall a single word or the evidence of a thought which Mrs. Chester could disapprove. It was her custom to read prayers to Lilah morning and evening, and Mrs. Chandos was invariably present, joining in them with unfeigned reverence and devoutness. One evening Mrs. Chester was moved to say to her son,—

“I do not for an instant believe that Mrs. Chandos is an atheist or anything of the sort. She is certainly no hypocrite; and it would be impossible for her to join in our prayers as she does unless she were at heart religious. Some one may have perverted her mind for the time, she may have come under some evil influence, but it has not been lasting, and the dear creature will, I know, in God’s own good time, be brought back to the fold.”

And the excellent lady wept as she spoke, for her heart yearned over Reine, and she was beginning to think her one of the best and noblest women in the world.

“As for that poetry, I cannot understand it. I try to forget that she ever wrote it. Some day she will, I am sure, regret it.”

Then Jack told his mother what had passed between him and Reine on the subject, and Mrs. Chester rejoiced greatly. She felt now that she could look with equanimity on the woman she had once feared and dreaded occupying the place she herself had held so long at the Hall. But she saw nothing in Reine’s manner to her son to indicate that she entertained anything more for him than a merely friendly feeling.

The only recreation which Reine permitted herself was a drive in the afternoon in Jack’s phaeton, and this she thoroughly enjoyed.

She had become sincerely fond of him, and his presence was now entirely pleasing to her. His good nature and sweet temper gave her an agreeable sense of repose, and during the time that she was in attendance on Lilah a chivalrous feeling prevented him from breathing a word of his love to her, lest it should vex or embarrass her.

The three weeks which Mrs. Herbert had laid down as the time of Reine’s stay at the Hall were drawing to a

close, and a letter came from Bournemouth which contained the paragraph,—

“Do not forget, my love, that I have some little claim on you, and that I am pining for you. Miss Lilah has, I think, had her full share of your attentions, and must be reminded that she is not the only person in the world. So do not desert me any longer, but reward my uncomplaining patience, and come back to me as soon as possible.”

Reine felt it her duty, as well as her pleasure, to comply with her friend's wish. Contrary to all anticipation, she had spent a very happy time at the Hall, and this made her feel the duty of returning to Mrs. Herbert more forcibly than she would have done under less favorable circumstances. She had conceived a great regard and affection for Mrs. Chester, who treated her like a beloved daughter; she was fond of Lilah, who, though exacting, was never petulant to her even in her severest paroxysms of suffering; and as for Jack,—well, she was forced to confess to herself that she cared for him more than she had believed herself capable of caring for any man. The idea of becoming his wife was not so absolutely ridiculous and preposterous in her eyes as it had formerly been.

The time of her departure was fixed, and mourning, lamentation, and woe reigned at the Hall. The morning before her departure, Jack sought his mother.

“Mother!” he said.

“Yes, my dear,” she replied.

But, somehow, Jack seemed as though he could not get any further. His mother went to him and laid a hand affectionately upon his arm.

“Is it something about Reine?” she said.

“Yes,” he answered. “Oh, mother, I feel I cannot live without her. If she won't marry me, I think it will break my heart!”

“You can but ask her,” said his mother, gently.

“And you?” he said, looking wistfully at her. “You know now what an angel she is. You—oh, mother! you won't let there be anything on your part to——”

“My dear boy,” and she kissed him with tears in her eyes, “she shall be like my own daughter.”

“God bless you, dear mother!” he cried, and hurried



from the room to conceal the agitation that mastered him.

By some not very Machiavellian art, a private interview between him and Reine was arranged that very afternoon, and, at the conclusion of it, Jack, with the most triumphant look of happiness that ever illumined a lover's countenance, led Reine, who wore a very pretty and beaming air of embarrassment, to his mother's presence.

"Mother," he said, "I bring you your daughter. And I am the very happiest fellow in all the world."

"God bless you, my dear, dear daughter!" cried Mrs. Chester, pressing Reine to her heart.

"And," said Reine, softly, "you are no longer afraid of my having a bad influence over him?"

"I am quite sure," answered Mrs. Chester, warmly, "that your influence will be good in every way. God bless you both, my dear children!"

Jack accompanied Reine to Bournemouth the next day, and it will be hardly necessary to say with what cordiality Mrs. Herbert gave her blessing to the pair.

"Are you quite sure, Mia," asked Reine, playfully, "that you are not a little bit jealous?"

"I shall try to get over it," answered Mrs. Herbert, smiling.

Jack squeezed her fingers with an energy that was a little trying; but she bore it like the Spartan boy.

"I shall never forget what I owe to you," he cried.

"I like a grateful heart," answered Mrs. Herbert, smiling heroically. "Who says one cannot enjoy vicariously? I feel almost as happy as though I were going to marry you myself!"

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

MRS. VERNON was leading a very pleasant life at Cannes. Several of her friends were there, and she had also made some agreeable acquaintances, and enjoyed a considerable popularity. She was a clever, well-bred woman, with a large fund of amusing small talk and a thorough

acquaintance with every topic of interest of the day. She was always ready to join in any party of pleasure, or to contribute her share to the general amusement. In this, a well-filled purse and liberal inclinations gave her every aid.

It was charming to hear her talk about her dear girl, and the trial that this enforced separation was to her; but she wished, of all things, that her child should be happy, and Dulcie had a great disinclination for foreign countries and life. She was paying delightful visits in England, and seemed perfectly happy. A mother must always make sacrifices; and her own health had forbidden her to face the trying English winter. And here Mrs. Vernon coughed the little cough that was scarcely more than an affectation.

She had given up disquieting herself about Dulcie's future, and was wise enough not to allow a matter to worry her which she could not control. It was with extreme surprise that, one morning, she received by the same post the two following letters. She first opened the one in a hand unfamiliar to her, although she fancied she had seen it before, and, turning to the end, read, with a slight increase of the action of her heart, the name "Noel Trevor."

She then went steadily through it from beginning to end, and when she had again come to the signature she laid it down with a sigh of relief.

"DEAR MRS. VERNON," (it ran,)

"Dulcie has promised to write you by the same post, telling you what we have agreed upon; and I hope you will be kind enough not to put any obstacles in the way of my happiness. I have been staying with the Fawcetts, and we had an explanation. Of course, as I am really married legally to her, there is no occasion for any further ceremony; but, as Dulcie wishes it, and says you wish it, I am ready to sacrifice my own feelings. All I ask is that there may not be any unnecessary delay. I do not wish to refer to the very painful position I have been in so long now, nor to what I have suffered; but I hope you will not forget these in answering my letter. If I acted wrongly towards you, my punishment has been very severe. I have come into seven hundred a year,

which an aunt left me a few months ago, and will settle every penny of it on Dulcie; and I hope I need not say that whatever she has of her own I wish to be settled on her. I should indeed be sorry if any one could think I want anything of her but herself," proceeded the letter.

"He is too good for her," thought the affectionate mother. "Poor young man! Well, no doubt his eyes will be opened soon enough."

"I would on no account ask you to come to England at this trying time of the year, as I hear your health is delicate; but would you have any objection to Dulcie going to you with some lady friend and to our being married abroad? I am going to send in my papers at once, as she wishes it, and shall soon be a free agent. Will you please let me know the name and address of your lawyer, that mine may see him and arrange about the settlements? Hoping to hear from you with as little delay as possible, believe me, dear Mrs. Vernon,

"Yours most truly,

"NOEL TREVOR."

The perusal of this letter gave Mrs. Vernon unbounded satisfaction. She had long ceased to feel vain regrets about the impossibility of Dulcie making a good marriage, and she looked forward with intense relief to the time when her own responsibility would cease and she would no longer have the fear of discovery and disgrace before her eyes. For she felt no confidence that her daughter might not some day bring dire trouble upon her by some act of folly.

"Now," she said, putting down Noel's letter and taking up Dulcie's, "let me see what she says about it."

"MY DEAR MAMMA"(wrote Dulcie),

"Noel is going to write and tell you everything, so I suppose there is no occasion for me to write it too. I suppose" (Dulcie could never be trained to avoid tautology) "it is better that as we are to be married the world should know it, but I don't see any particular occasion for hurry, and perhaps you would write and tell him so, as he did not seem to like my saying it. I have told the Fawcetts that he proposed last night and that I accepted him. I



suppose he has told you that he has come into some money. Had I not better go back to Anna next week and see about getting my things? Mary Fawcett wants to be bridesmaid. Do you think I had better have any bridesmaids? and, if so, whom shall I ask? Please write by return.

“Your affectionate daughter,  
“DULCIE VERNON.”

“I do not believe the girl has an atom of heart,” said Mrs. Vernon to herself, with considerable irritation. “I shall certainly have as little delay as possible, or she may change her mind again. I had better go home at once.” And she thought with some regret of the pleasant life she would have to quit, and of the parties in prospect for the following week. She was, however, not a woman to allow pleasure to interfere with business, and immediately set about making preparations for her return. Next winter and every winter following she would, please heaven, be free to make her arrangements independently of any and every other person. The court of chancery had to be apprised of Dulcie’s engagement,—law-matters always took a long time,—and she could not trust Dulcie to get her trousseau alone.

All things considered, it would be far better for her to return to England at once. She despatched a gracious letter to Noel, and a semi-affectionate one to her daughter, bidding her meet her in Grosvenor Street on the third day following. She then communicated to the astonished Morton that Miss Dulcie was going to marry Mr. Trevor in a few weeks’ time, and bade her pack at once for their journey on the morrow.

Morton would have given up a quarter’s wages to be allowed to ask and hear all particulars; but there was something in her lady’s manner that deterred her from presuming to utter a question.

She was sure she was very glad, she said; but, without noticing her remark, Mrs. Vernon at once plunged into the details of packing.

To her friends and acquaintances she contented herself with a smiling hint that she had received some very interesting news from home which necessitated her presence,

and which she hoped to tell them more about at no very distant date.

Even now she dared not be anything more than ambiguous, as heaven alone knew what Dulcie might take it into her head to do before the event really came off.

When Noel read her gracious letter, his heart filled with joy and gratitude, and he forgave her on the spot for her former coldness and harshness. She apprised him of her intention to go to London at once, and invited him to luncheon the day following her return. She saw no reason for delay, she wrote; and, if legal matters could be settled in so short a time, everything else could well be arranged.

As she travelled homeward, she carefully cut and dried her plans. She would allow every one to believe that she was pleased with the marriage, and that she thought much more of her daughter's happiness than of wealth or social distinction. She would speak in the highest terms of her intended son-in-law, and would give it as her opinion that long engagements were a mistake, and that, when two young people had thoroughly made up their minds about each other, delay was unnecessary and inconvenient to every one. She would hint that the attachment was not altogether a new affair, but that before Noel came into his aunt's money she had not thought it prudent to sanction the marriage. She even settled upon the friends whom she would ask to the wedding, the trousseau she would buy, and the four bridesmaids who should be invited to attend Dulcie to the altar. Nothing was forgotten in her calculations, not even the wedding-ring lying in her dressing-case, which she decided should not do duty again, as it had brought such ill luck before.

Dulcie was in Grosvenor Street, awaiting her mother's arrival. She had seen Noel in the afternoon: indeed, he had met her at the station and conveyed her home, and had taken occasion to present her with a very handsome half-hoop of diamonds, at which she expressed a lively sense of gratification. He was so radiantly happy, yet so delicate and discreet in his behavior to her, that Dulcie, who had a gentle and amiable nature, though she was weak of will and purpose, began once again to experience something of the feeling of old days for him. She forgot

Alwyne, or, if she thought of him, felt only a smothered resentment against him for his cruel treatment of her and his ostentatious attentions to his wife. He had never really loved her, she said to herself, but Noel's devotion had been unswerving from the first moment. He had succeeded in convincing her that his intimacy with the colonel's wife had been simply the outcome of his love for her, as that dear kind little woman, to whom he should forever be grateful, and whom he hoped (after the absurd and short-sighted manner of his kind) Dulcie would also know and love, had listened without wearying to his constant talk of her without showing the slightest symptom of being bored.

And when he asked Dulcie, in a voice trembling from excessive emotion, if she thought she could come to love him again in time, she behaved with a charming coyness which, although it did not express very much, did not by any means forbid him to hope.

The poor fellow was so happy when he walked away from the house that he reflected for the first time that perhaps everything was for the best, and that it was certainly a good deal more satisfactory to marry his darling in the open eye of day, before all the world, and with her mother's consent, than to steal her away in secret and subject her to all sorts of disagreeable and ill-natured gossip. No one would be able to say that he had wanted her for her money: everything he possessed should be hers, and he would take nothing from her.

Mrs. Vernon was most agreeably surprised when she met Noel. The haggard and wan look had left his face, and, under the influence of his great happiness and restored health, he was quite a different man from what she remembered him at their last interview. He behaved to her with the most courteous respect, and she received him as though he were an eligible suitor to whom she was well disposed. They had some little private talk about business matters, after which Mrs. Vernon thought it advisable to give him a hint about the management of Dulcie. She spoke in a pleasant, smiling manner.

"I see you are very devoted to Dulcie, and I hope she will return your affection. She has a very amiable disposition, but her character is wanting in firmness, and it



is of the greatest importance that she should have some one to lean on and to look up to. Do not forget the necessity of being firm with a nature like hers: let her respect as well as love you. I abdicate entirely in your favor from the time when she leaves me to go to you. Do not treat the responsibility of your situation lightly."

And Noel, with every evidence of gratitude and good will, assured her that he would not be unmindful of the value of the treasure to be confided to him, and went away, poor fellow! thinking in his honest heart that never had a man been so blest before, and that he would indeed be a villain and a blackguard if he showed himself in any way unworthy of so angelic a creature. He had one of those kindly dispositions incapable of cherishing rancor or remembering injuries, and he had almost forgotten that Dulcie had ever been cruel to him or expressed a preference for another man.

To Dulcie her mother resumed her manner of former years, and was as kind and thoughtful as the most devoted mother could have been. She determined to forget the past, and to part from her on affectionate terms. It is but fair to Mrs. Vernon to say that she would have been willing to pardon Dulcie any foolish action, and to shield her from its consequences, had the girl trusted and confided in her. The resentment she felt had been entirely caused by Dulcie's hostility to and want of confidence in her; and ingratitude in the eyes of a woman like Mrs. Vernon was a heinous offence. But now the past was wiped out. It did not seem probable that she would see a great deal of the young couple in the future. Dulcie would come into her fortune on her marriage, and would be, in a pecuniary way, independent of her mother.

Mr. Benson was sincerely relieved at the fortunate turn matters had taken. Morton, turncoat that she was, expressed the greediest delight at this happy conclusion, and vowed that she had always been Mr. Trevor's friend. In short, the very crooked course that Noel's love had taken now appeared about to end in a vista of perfect straightness and smoothness, and everything bade fair to conclude in the approved story-book fashion.

Dulcie lived in a delightful tumult of shopping and general excitement. Friends who owed wedding-presents,

and some who did not, sent them in in shoals. The bridesmaids consented with delight to attend her; the wedding-guests promised joyfully to come. Mrs. Vernon obtained the services of a friendly bishop, and all that remained to pray for was a fine day. Of course the old proverb, "*De deux amants*," etc., was verified; but it was obvious to the dullest observer that Dulcie was extremely well disposed to her devoted adorer.

"You loved me once, darling!" cried Noel, wistfully, a day or two before the marriage, smitten by a momentary doubt.

"I loved you once, and I love you again," Dulcie answered, sweetly.

And for the first time voluntarily she put her arms round his neck, and, with a lovely blush, kissed him. Phœbus graced the ceremony with the utmost brilliancy of which, at that early period of the year, he was capable. As the guests assembled in the church waiting for the great event, how little any of them dreamed that this handsome and happy-looking young couple were already man and wife!

Breakfast was over; the speeches were made; the bride, beautifully arrayed in her travelling-dress, and looking like a rose-bud, stepped into the carriage, and shoes and rice were showered liberally upon them as they drove off.

Noel's heart thrilled with triumph. He forgot his sufferings; nay, he would not have had anything different if he could. What a right good world it was!

"At last, my own darling, at last!" he cried, with a ringing voice.

And Dulcie answered, smiling,—

"This is better, is it not, than last time?"

THE END.





